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Fragile Bonds: An Ethnographic Investigation of Marriage-Making Amongst Muslims in Cairo

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PhD in Social Anthropology
The University of Edinburgh
2013
Abstract

This thesis is based upon ethnographic fieldwork on the process of becoming married in Cairo. It focuses specifically upon the experiences of Cairene Muslims, and centres on the profound sense of anxiety and uncertainty which so frequently surrounds the marriage-making process. This thesis is an attempt to make sense of the salience of these emotions, against a backdrop of economic and political instability, a broader interest in modesty and decorum, and public concern about an alleged ‘marriage crisis’. It also explores the various ways in which prospective affines seek to manage the pervasive sense of anxiety and uncertainty associated with the production of marriage in Cairo. To this end, the thesis examines the ways in which phenomena, ranging from assessments about the ‘suitability’ of a given conjugal home to the perceived outcome of a particular form of petitionary prayer, enter into decisions about whom to marry and come to affect confidence in a given choice. The thesis thus presents a complex picture of the agency of prospective affines, and pays particular attention to the relationship between agency and knowledge.
Declaration

Date: 3rd May 2013

I declare that this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

A few paragraphs from the introduction have been adapted from my Masters dissertation but have been clearly referenced as such.

Signature:
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Acknowledgements

I am deeply grateful to the many people in Cairo who helped me with my research. This thesis would not have been possible without their willingness to share their time, thoughts, experience and lives with me. A particular debt of gratitude is owed to the people I have named Marwa and Hanan. Each will be able to detect the influence they have had upon the writing of this thesis and their friendship greatly enriched my experience of life in Cairo.

I must also thank my supervisors, Janet Carsten and Tobias Kelly. The diligence and enthusiasm with which they approached the task of supervision is truly exemplary. I have benefited greatly from their wise counsel and can safely say that I could not have hoped for a better set of supervisors.

I am grateful to the participants of Edinburgh’s ‘writing-up seminar’ for providing valuable feedback along the way. Janet Carsten, Jennifer Curtis, Magnus Course, Maya Mayblin and Sandy Robertson played a critical role in making these seminars a success. I am very thankful to my colleagues and friends at Edinburgh for making the task of planning and writing this thesis infinitely more enjoyable. Particular thanks are due to Beginda, Bethany, Cristobal, Evangelos, Laura, Lisa, Lucy, Siobhan, Stewart, Supurna, Sylvia and Tristan.

I am grateful to the ESRC for generously funding this research.

I must also thank my mother for her common-sense advice during fieldwork. I am thankful to my father for being there in the days leading up to submission. I am deeply indebted to Iain who has lived with this thesis in the last few years and has been an endless source of support and encouragement.
On Translation and Transliteration

Frequently used Arabic terms are contained within the glossary. When transliterating from Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), I have deployed the system set out in the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*. When transcribing from Egyptian Colloquial Arabic (ECA), I have adopted the system outlined in *The Dictionary of Egyptian Arabic* by el-Said Badawi and Martin Hinds (1986). Names with common English spellings, such as Mubarak, have been maintained as such. As have Arabic words which have been assimilated into the English language.
Introduction

This thesis is based upon fieldwork undertaken from October 2009 to December 2010 on the process of becoming married in Cairo and focuses specifically upon the experiences of Cairene Muslims. The thesis pays particular attention to the purchase of marital jewellery, the procurement of a conjugal home and other preparations for marriage and highlights how these activities often feed into decisions about whom to marry. I point out that the marriage-making process does not always proceed in a straightforward and orderly manner, that it often entails disruptions, blockages and, in the event of the termination of an engagement, rupture. I therefore argue that marriage-making is a somewhat unpredictable process. I point out that marriage-making in Cairo is often pervaded by a profound sense of anxiety and uncertainty. Interestingly, such feelings colour the experiences of those whose choice of spouse conforms with normative principles, as well as those that defy these norms. And this thesis is, in many ways, an attempt to make sense of the salience of anxiety and uncertainty within this context and to explore the myriad ways in which Cairene Muslims deal with such unsettling emotions.

In so doing, I reflect upon the issue of agency. I pay particular attention to the experience of agency. I demonstrate that agency within this domain is not without constraint and highlight how phenomena such as state regulation, the finitude of one’s material resources and a concern with propriety can serve to curb or otherwise complicate the agency that aspiring affines exercise over the production of marriage. I also draw attention to the ambiguities of agency within this context. Drawing inspiration from the work of Perveez Mody (2008), Hannah Arendt (1958), Alfred Gell (1992) and Anthony Giddens (1991), I consider what might, in Mody’s words, be described as the ‘double-edged’ (Mody 2008: 46) nature of prospective spouses’ agency over the marriage-making process and how this might help us understand the anxiety and uncertainty which so frequently pervades this process.

Whilst it can of course be argued that anxiety and uncertainty pervade the production of marriage in many other contexts, I would contend that such emotions might be more pronounced in some cultural contexts than in others and that the ways in which
persons grapple with these emotions is equally likely to vary between cultures. At the
time in which I was conducting fieldwork, Cairo was believed to be in the grips of a
‘marriage crisis’ (azmat al-gawaaz). Later in this introduction I will describe this
supposed crisis in further detail but at this stage I would like to point out that in a
context in which divorce in the early years of marriage is a source of public concern
and in which many complain that their ability to marry is compromised by financial
circumstances, it is, perhaps, not entirely surprising that the process of becoming
married is treated with particular trepidation. I also describe how years of economic
instability affects the way in which people plan and prepare for marriage, asserting
that a broader sense of economic uncertainty only adds to the pressure upon
prospective affines to ensure that married life begins in a conjugal home of ‘suitable’
standard. I will also point out that within the contemporary Cairene context, a
concern with purity and propriety influences the kinds of knowledge about a
prospective spouse that many feel able to attain and will consider how this affects
perceptions of the predictability of the outcome of a particular choice. The issue of
knowledge and determinacy lies at the heart of both this thesis and the ways in which
my informants planned and prepared for marriage. I conclude the thesis with a
critical reflection upon Arendt’s work on predictability and human action.

I begin the introduction of this thesis with a brief discussion of previous
anthropological work on marriage in Egypt. I then proceed to describe the religious,
economic, political and legal context in which I conducted fieldwork. I provide a
brief sketch of the broader economic and political context of this study. I argue that
the fieldwork for this thesis was undertaken at a time in which many believed that
their economic futures were uncertain and in which the long-term political future of
the nation was a source of speculation. I describe public discourse and concern about
Egypt’s alleged marriage crisis and consider how this might affect the relational
trajectories of those seeking to marry. I draw attention to the fact that the fieldwork
for this thesis was conducted in the aftermath of a series of administrative and
legislative reforms pertaining to marriage. I note that a concern with religious
observance and with propriety in conduct affected the way in which many of my
informants planned, prepared and thought about marriage, and place such concern
within the context of the rise of Islamic revivalism within Egypt. Having provided a
brief outline of the ethnographic context for the thesis, I provide a broader outline of
the anthropological context with a commentary on the literature on marriage. I then
proceed to describe how fieldwork was conducted, and complete the introduction
with a brief description of the chapters which follow.

The Study of Marriage in Egypt

Marcia Inhorn writes ‘ethnographers and ethnographies of what might be called
‘gender interaction’ or ‘marital ethnography’ are largely absent, not only for the
Middle East, but within the discipline of anthropology as a whole’ (Inhorn 2012: 12).
Inhorn further claims that the paucity of anthropological literature on marriage in the
Middle East ‘reflects the highly gender-divided world of Middle Eastern
anthropology: namely, women study women and men study men’ (Inhorn 2012: 12).
Although I agree with Inhorn that anthropological literature on Middle Eastern
marriage is in somewhat short supply, I would point out that Abu Lughod’s Veiled
Sentiments quite clearly demonstrates that ethnographic fieldwork which centres
upon the lives of women does not necessarily preclude the study of marriage. Indeed
Abu Lughod’s seminal work on honour and poetry amongst a group of Bedouin, the
Awlad Ali, residing in the Western desert of Egypt offers an important contribution
to the anthropological understanding of marriage in Egypt and beyond.

It is important to note, however, that this account of marriage amongst the Awlad Ali
is not representative of marriage in Egypt as a whole. Indeed, in subsequent work,
Abu Lughod herself states ‘the Awlad Ali Bedouin of Egypt’s Western Desert, work
with very different ideas about marriage and child-rearing from those of
contemporary urban middle-class Egyptians’ (Abu Lughod 1998: 260). I would add
that the Awlad Ali’s approach to marriage is not only different from that adopted by
‘contemporary urban middle-class Egyptians’ (Abu Lughod 1998: 260) but is also
different to that of contemporary urban Egyptians of other socio-economic
backgrounds. This thesis does, nonetheless, draw significant inspiration from Abu-
Lughod’s work. Indeed, in keeping with Abu Lughod’s approach, this thesis pays
particular attention to the experience of kinship. And while Abu Lughod focuses
upon sentiments including romantic love, attachment and dependency, this thesis focuses upon feelings of anxiety and uncertainty.

This thesis should be considered against the backdrop of Egypt’s alleged marriage crisis (azmat al-gawaaz). I will discuss the nature of this crisis in detail later, yet at this point I would like to draw attention to the rich and seemingly ever-growing body of literature on this topic (Abaza 2001; Ibrahim & Singerman 2001; Singerman 2007; Dhillon 2007) and the excellent scholarship of Hanan Kholoussy (2010) and Frances Hasso (2011). Hanan Kholoussy’s wonderful analysis of a supposed crisis in bachelorhood that was believed to have seized Egypt in the early twentieth century offers historical perspective. Hasso’s work on family crises in the Middle East is informed by Foucauldian scholarship on biopower and considers some of the not entirely intended outcomes of feminist and liberal activists’ endeavours to democratise gender and family relations within Egypt. Yet while for Kholoussy (2010) and Hasso (2011) the issue of crisis constitutes a principal focus for analysis, the current study deals with Egypt’s alleged marriage crisis in so far as it sheds light on the anxiety and uncertainty which so frequently pervades the marriage-making process in Cairo.

Discussions of Egypt’s alleged marriage crisis make frequent reference to the costs associated with marriage in Egypt. The work of Singerman and Ibrahim (2001) has acquired particular recognition in this regard. Singerman and Ibrahim discuss the financial burdens associated with getting married in Egypt, including the high cost of procuring, furnishing and equipping a home, and suggest that these might act as an impediment to marriage itself. And whilst they are highly adept at explaining why the cost of marriage appears to have risen and at discussing some of its consequences, they do not really consider why the provision of a ‘suitable’ home is deemed so important to marriage in Egypt. This is a question that I address in Chapter Four of this thesis.

The issue of adjustment and its perceived effect upon the durability of the conjugal bond features prominently in the analysis presented in Chapter Four. In a monograph entitled Creating Families Across Boundaries: A Case Study of Romanian-Egyptian Marriages, Vinea (2007) presents qualitative research on marriage between Egyptian
men and Romanian women. Vinea explores the political, economic and legal contexts which made such transnational unions possible and briefly describes some aspects of her informants’ experiences within these unions. This includes a discussion of patterns of residence, division of labour and the various ways in which religious differences were negotiated. Vinea’s work serves to underline the fact that marriage is always, at some level, a process of adjustment to and negotiation of difference.¹ And while Vinea focuses upon her informants’ experiences of this process, this thesis considers how the anticipation of adjustment comes to shape decisions about whom to marry and pre-marital negotiations about and arrangements for life after matrimony.

My analysis of spouse selection has been further informed by the literature on matchmaking in Egypt. Janet Abu Lughod and Lucy Amin provide a fascinating analysis of marriage advertisements published in the Egyptian magazine *Rose Al Youssef* in the 1950s. Their work points towards the marginal nature of those who make use of this kind of service as well as cultural definitions of the ideal spouse (Abu Lughod & Amin 1961). Over thirty years later Abu Hashish and Petersen (1999) published an article on computer mediated match-making in Cairo. This article offers some insight into the traits associated with a desirable mate, the process of searching for and selecting a spouse, briefly mentioning familial investigations of a prospective spouse’s background. These issues are also examined in this thesis but whereas Abu Hashish’s and Petersen’s (1999) discussion of these subjects is embedded within a theoretical reflection upon globalisation, cultural diffusion and the production of hybridity, my discussion of these issues is embedded within a reflection upon knowledge, futurity and the experience of agency.

This includes a description of how one’s capacity to ‘know’ a prospective spouse is complicated by a broader sense of concern about modesty and propriety and how this is seen to affect one’s ability to determine the auspiciousness of a particular union. The issue of modesty and propriety is addressed in Mahmood’s (2005) account of the women’s piety movement in Cairo. Mahmood offers some particularly interesting

¹ This point has also been advanced in other work on marriage in different geographic settings (See for example Carsten 1997; Uberoi & Singh 2006)
insight into debates over the religious acceptability of certain forms of male-female interaction - debates that, as illustrated later in one of the sections below, is of particular relevance to an understanding of the marriage-making process. This thesis extends Mahmood’s discussion of male-female interaction in Egypt by highlighting the significance that ritual status has upon Cairene definitions of ‘proper’ conduct.

I have found that work on subjects such as gender, poverty and development also provide valuable information on the topic of marriage (Wikan 1980, 1996; El Kholy 2002; Singerman 1995; Hoodfar 1997; Watson 1992). Indeed Wikan, Hoodfar, El Kholy, Watson and Singerman’s work combine to offer the reader some insight into the nature of a range of customs and practices which surround the production of marriage in Egypt including the process of selecting a spouse, the gifting of the *shabka* (marital jewellery) and the importance of the *Gayma* (list). In so doing, they have frequently stressed women’s agency over these processes and have pointed to the protective function of certain forms of marital preparation. My study seeks to contribute to this discussion, by providing a detailed exposition of the kinds of ambivalence which surround practices such as the writing of the *Gayma* (list). In this process, it describes how one form of ‘protection’ might in fact produce another form of peril.

The issue of protection from peril surfaces in a great deal of recent work on the legal dimensions of marriage in Egypt. It is important to highlight the existence of a particularly rich body of literature on this topic. This thesis draws chiefly upon work on the nature of the marriage contract (Sonbol 2005; Zulficar 2008; Shaham 1999; Ezzat 2010), legislative reform including the introduction of *khul’* (female-initiated, unilateral no-fault divorce) (Singerman 2005; Sonneveld 2006; Al Sharmani 2009, 2010; Cuno 2008) and the much-debated issue of *gawaaz al-erfee* (customary marriage) (Abaza 2001; Hasso 2011; Karkabi 2011; Zubaida 2003). In so doing, it considers the ways in which practices such as registration are enfolded into or excluded from the marriage-making process.

From anxieties about the prospect of divorce, to concern about the knowability of a prospective spouse and from the anticipation of the difficulties of adjustment to life after marriage to the struggles of affording a ‘suitable’ marriage, one might be
tempted to ask why so many seek to marry. I would argue that while marriage might be seen to carry the risk of hardship, a life without marriage is very rarely desired. Indeed it is commonly said that marriage constitutes ‘half of the religion’ (nuṣṣ ad-dyn), that marriage is commanded by God and helps prevent one from straying onto the wrong path (Sherif 1999). Beyond this, marriage is seen as a pre-requisite for parenthood, a vocation that in this pro-natalist context commands considerable respect and that is commonly conceived as a source of immense fulfilment (Inhorn 1996; Singerman 1995). Moreover, while unmarried Egyptians are commonly considered to be particularly dependent upon their parents, their married counterparts are considered to have achieved a greater sense of autonomy in this respect (Hoodfar 1997; El Kholy 2002; Singerman 1995). Further still, the older one becomes the more likely that one’s unmarried status will attract negative judgement and, in the course of fieldwork, I repeatedly bore witness to the sense of marginalisation and isolation that singleness, especially spinsterhood, in Egypt can create. Saba Mahmood (2005) provides a particularly insightful portrayal of this issue.

These studies of contemporary Egyptian marriage are supplemented by a rich body of historical literature on the way that ideas about the family entered into colonial and nationalist discourse about Independence. In 1882, British troops invaded and occupied Egypt and effectively ‘established a new colonial regime’ (Kholoussy 2010: 5). This extension of British imperialism was far from popular at home (Goldschmidt 2004). British officials were therefore under intense pressure to legitimise the continuation of occupation (Pollard 2005). One of the key ways in which they did so was to argue that Egypt was not ‘ready’ for self-rule and that the military would withdraw as soon as she had reached ‘political maturity’ (Pollard 2005: 5).

Such arguments were distinctly evolutionist in nature and made frequent reference to the state of the family within Egypt. Indeed many colonial commentators asserted, with varying degrees of explicitness, that the state of Egypt’s domestic realm was indicative of its political maturity and by extension its readiness for liberation from

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2 Although this regime effectively replaced the Ottoman one which preceded it, ‘Egypt nominally remained a province of the Ottoman empire’ (Kholoussy 2010: 5) until it was placed under British protectorate in 1914.
imperial rule. This argument was underpinned by the belief that dispositions and habits learned in the family and the home were transported into and had a bearing upon the political realm and culminated in the assertion that ‘Egyptian marital and domestic practices’ including the practice of polygamy ‘signalled despotism and political backwardness’ (Pollard 2005:9). This assertion was, it should be noted, at least partially informed by orientalist literature, was most certainly framed by Victorian definitions of progressive family life and was linked to the corollary view that the domestic life of Egyptians would need to be reformed before self-rule could be granted.3

This was a view that was internalised by Egyptian nationalists who subsequently introduced a series of measures targeted towards reforming the family and thereby demonstrating the nation’s supposed ‘readiness’ for self-rule. Marriage was a central focus for reform. Indeed, historian Hanan Kholoussy remarks ‘certain secular nationalists and nationalist feminists promoted adult, monogamous, permanent marriage as the road to national independence’ (Kholoussy 2005: 340) and thus in some cases introduced, and in other cases merely proposed, a series of legislative and procedural reforms designed to encourage the cultivation of this ideal.

For example, the introduction of procedural reform in 1923 and in 1931 served to discourage the marriage of minors without specifically outlawing this practice. This will be discussed in further detail in Chapter Six. And whilst early 20th Century debate on this topic did make reference to the welfare of the parties (especially female) involved (Baron 1993; Kholoussy 2005; Kholoussy 2010), a number of commentator’s perception of this institution was framed by the belief that ‘a strong nation can only be built from a large, well-raised, educated offspring and such offspring can only be formed by mature mothers’ (Quoted in Kholoussy 2005: 321).4

Similarly, legislative reform introduced in 1929 served to invalidate divorces which were issued as a threat and those which were pronounced whilst intoxicated, whilst under duress, and those uttered without intention (Baron 1993, 1994; Kholoussy

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3 Victorian definitions of progressive family life conferred particular value upon stable and orderly households which centred around a couple within a permanent, monogamous and companionate marriage (Pollard 2005)

4 Kholoussy (2005) mentions that this statement was made by the editors of Al Ahram, but does not specify their names.
2005, 2010). This reform also meant that the state would not recognise a triple ḥulāq (pronouncement of divorce) if uttered on a single occasion. In this way, reforms introduced in 1929 served to, slightly, inhibit men’s access to divorce. And finally the early 20th Century witnessed numerous unsuccessful attempts to pass legislation that would restrict the practice of polygamy. Whilst advocates of such legislation would often speak of the welfare of the wives of such unions, they also argued that monogamy helps preserve the harmony of the home and may thereby contribute to the strength of the next generation (Kholoussy 2005, 2010).

Beth Baron states that in the late 19th and early 20th Century ‘a new ideal of marriage- a partnership based on affection- emerged in Egypt as part of the reshaping of the family and the redefinition of gender roles linked to the shift towards capitalism and the rise of nationalism’ (Baron 1994: 166). Interestingly, this shift towards companionate unions based upon a ‘harmony of spirits’ was perceived by Egyptian nationalist, Qasim Amin to produce ‘a solid tie that will be difficult to break’ (Amin 2005: 78). Amin served as a vocal advocate of reforms that would promote the achievement of this companionate ideal and thus bring the nation one step further towards independence. These included efforts to advance the education of women and changes to the way that marriages were forged. Indeed in The Liberation of Women Amin argues that ‘a husband’s lack of love for his wife can be attributed to her intellectual backwardness’ (Amin 2005: 20), that the disparity in intellect between husband and wife is most apparent in the middle and upper classes and that this situation might be remedied through conscientious efforts to educate women (Abu Lughod 1998). And Amin and others also criticised the way that customary ideas about modesty prevented couples from getting to know one another prior to marriage. They argued that such ideas served as an impediment against the achievement of a companionate ideal and ultimately weakened the conjugal bond. They therefore called for a shift in attitude which would make a greater level of pre-marital acquaintance possible (Amin 1998; Kholoussy 2010; Baron 1993).

Thus in the late 19th and early 20th Century marriage was the source and target of intense debate and substantive reform. Much of this debate and reform was linked to British colonial attempts to justify the persistence of an occupation that was
unpopular at home, and indigenous attempts to reach a state of readiness for self-rule. Many of the aforementioned legislative and procedural reforms are still in force today, and modernist and nationalist efforts to advance the education of women and to promote a companionate ideal of marriage have had a lasting impact upon the intimate lives of many, especially urban, Egyptians.

**The Economic and Political Context**

At the time I began fieldwork, Hosni Mubarak was eighty-one years of age. And, despite his best efforts, he was looking rather frail. In March 2010, Mubarak underwent gall bladder surgery in Germany, an event that sparked considerable speculation about the state of his health and Egypt’s long-term political future. His son, Gamal was ‘widely seen as being groomed’ (Amin 2011: 1; see also Osman 2011; El-Din 2010; El-Ghobashy 2010b) for succession. However, this possibility was widely reviled, Hosni’s government was unpopular and Gamal was considered to be aloof and disconnected from the everyday realities of much of the population (Osman 2011).

So, why was Mubarak so unpopular? Mubarak ascended to the presidency following the assassination of Sadat in 1981 and thereon took it upon himself to continue with and extend Sadat’s policy of *al-infitāḥ*, or economic liberalisation. Upon becoming president, Mubarak was confronted with the challenge of lowering Egypt’s national debt (Osman 2011; Amin 2011). This required a reduction in public spending but Sadat had eased the restrictions that Nasser had placed upon emigration from Egypt and so the effects of this reduction in state spending were partially ameliorated by remittances received from Egyptians working abroad. However in 1986 oil prices suddenly fell, Egyptian workers began to return from the Gulf and remittances began to dry up. In response to growing pressure from the IMF, the state persisted with its policy of economic liberalisation. Pressure to cut back state spending resulted in a deterioration in public services and a decrease in state subsidisation of transportation, accommodation, education and medical assistance. This had a profound impact upon the everyday lives of many Egyptians, many of whom saw state attempts to
restructure the economy as evidence of the state’s increasing dereliction of its duties to its citizens (Amin 2011; Osman 2011).

Public resentment over the many ‘restructuring programmes of the 1990s and 2000s’ (Osman 2011: 142) was further compounded by the fact that high levels of inflation meant that the real income of many Egyptians was beginning to dwindle. The associated loss in purchasing power had a detrimental effect upon standard of living, and the global food crisis of 2007 only added to the problem (El-Ghobashy 2010a). In chapters three and four of this thesis I describe how a familiarity with such decline affects the way that many Egyptians plan and prepare for marriage. Yet, it is also important to bear in mind that this experience of a declining standard of living was not endured by all. On the contrary, a privileged few were enjoying significant material advancement (Osman 2011).

Theoretically, such divergence in fortune might be regarded as a logical and legitimate consequence of the fact that some pockets of the population are more able or willing to exploit the opportunities presented by economic liberalisation (e.g. increased access to employment abroad) than others. And whilst this might, to some extent, be true, there was also in Tarek Osman’s words, ‘a pervasive feeling’ that those who benefited most from the regime’s policy of so-called economic liberalisation did so as a result of fraudulent activity. ‘From concessions on land, goods and commodities to mandates on contracts, to agencies and dealerships, the regime (through the differing arms of the security apparatus) exerted immense influence’ (Osman 2011: 131) over who was to gain and who was to lose from its distinctive brand of neo-liberalism (Amar & Singerman 2006; El-Ghobashy 2010a).

Public concern about corruption did a great deal to undermine the legitimacy of Mubarak’s government. But as I mentioned earlier in this chapter, the legitimacy of the government was also undermined by the fact that public healthcare, education and infrastructure were considered to be in an ever-increasing state of disrepair. Various charities, including ones associated with political organisations, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, worked to compensate for this perceived shortfall in state services. At the same time, the state was receiving large sums of USAID and was under significant pressure to ‘democratise’ (El-Ghobashy 2010; Amar and
Singerman 2006). As authoritarian as the regime was, it was not without critics or opponents. Indeed Tarek Osman (2011) reports that from 2007-2008, over one hundred and fifty strikes and demonstrations took place in Egypt. Opposition groups such as Al-Ghad, Kifaya, April 6 Youth Group and of course the Muslim Brothers were afforded greater public visibility and found opportunity to express grievances about a wide range of issues, including economic inequality, state abuse of human rights and political corruption. Such grievances only added to the precariousness of the regime.

While protests and demonstrations were, at least prior to January 2011, only attended by a small minority of Egyptians, they reflected a broader sense of discontent with the state of the nation that tended to be expressed in rather more quotidian contexts. Such discontent was reflected in complaints about the congested state of the centre of the city and of the time it took to perform one’s daily commute. The force of such complaints intensified in cases in which one came to realise that the cause of a particular jam was the passing of a minister’s car. Discontent was also manifest in everyday middle- and working class conversations lamenting the rising cost of food. Whilst talk of the price of tomatoes, milk or meat might seem rather trivial and mundane, in the course of fieldwork I began to realise such discourse was profoundly significant. For many, the frequency with which one could eat meat served as a barometer of one’s economic fortunes and the fact that diet had become rather more herbivorous of late was considered to be symptomatic of broader structural issues with the nation’s economy. One’s ability to afford meat took on a rather different tone during a’yd al-a‘ḍḥā (feast of the sacrifice). During this festival, animals, most typically sheep, are slaughtered in commemoration of Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son under God’s command, and families gather together to share a meal, including some form of meat. However, not everyone is able to afford to go out and purchase meat or procure an animal for slaughter. While many in this position receive gifts of meat from those more affluent than themselves, some, it seems, either refuse or are denied this opportunity. At the time I was conducting fieldwork, stories abounded of husband and fathers who had committed suicide due to their inability to provide their families with meat for this celebration.
Grievance about the state of the nation was also manifest in complaints about corruption. While I was very cautious about engaging in conversation on this topic, I found that it could never be entirely eschewed. Indeed, while visiting the mosque of Ibn Taluun, I was approached by a policeman asking for ba'zfeel (a tip). A friend who was with me successfully persuaded the policeman to go away. Yet, later she commented that ‘the problem with this country is that you don’t know when a tip is a tip and when it’s corruption’. Concern with and resentment about corruption also surfaced in conversations about seemingly innocuous topics such as exam results, car number plates and ma'ai'dat ar-rafi'maan (tables of mercy). Yet, most pertinent to this thesis, discontent about the state of the nation emerged in public and private discourse about marriage. The fact that so many Egyptians were struggling to afford the expense of getting married in a ‘suitable’ manner was seen as a particularly damning indictment of the state of the country. From protests to corruption, and from the negative effects of al-infitāḥ to concern about the health of an octogenarian president, Egypt was, it seemed, in a state of profound economic and political instability.

Forging Conjugal Bonds in a Time of Crisis

At the time I was undertaking fieldwork, Egypt was believed to be in the grips of a ‘marriage crisis’ (azmat al-gawaaz). This alleged crisis was believed to be multifaceted in nature, and whilst it encompassed growing public concern about a supposed rise in secret and unregistered unions as well as a concern with the incidence of divorce in the early years of marriage, it was most typically associated with the impediment that the obligation to provide various material phenomena associated with marriage can place upon the cultivation of conjugal ties. These material barriers to marriage are popularly associated with a supposed crisis of spinsterhood (azmat al-a’anoosa) within Egypt. The actual extent of these

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5 ma'ai'dat ar-rafi'maan are set up during the month of Ramadan and provide free food for those wishing to break the fast. They predominantly cater to the impoverished and rely upon charitable donation. Some ma'ai'dat ar-rafi'maan are, however, allegedly sponsored by political candidates whose motives for so doing are occasionally cast into question.
‘problems’ was rather difficult to discern. The fact that secret and unregistered unions are largely illegible to the state, as well as many others, means that any attempt to enumerate the annual incidence of this kind of union is profoundly problematic. Likewise, our understanding of the rate of divorce in the early years of marriage is compromised by a lack of information. Indeed the Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics was unable to provide details of the duration of 25% of the marriages which ended in legally registered divorce in 2008 (CAPMAS 2009: 64). In a similar vein, whilst official statistics might furnish us with information on the numbers of women of given ages who have yet to marry, they do not provide an unequivocal understanding of Egypt’s alleged crisis of spinsterhood. The definition of a spinster is not absolute, it can vary over time and according to one’s social, economic and educational vantage point.

Yet however difficult it might be to determine statistically the extent and indeed the reality of Egypt’s alleged marriage crisis, the fact remains that Egypt is popularly perceived to be burdened by a marriage crisis of alarming scale. Both local and international media are awash with articles on the dangers of unregistered unions, the prevalence of divorce in the early years of marriage and the frustrations of those who find themselves unable to marry (see, for example, Adel 2009; Abdel-Kader 2010; Abdoun 2009, 2010; Abdelhadi 2008; Knell 2010; Slackman 2008). Concern with this alleged crisis features in public seminars and discussion, in formal academic discourse and in everyday conversation (Hasso 2011; Abaza 2001; Ibrahim & Singerman 2001; Singerman 2007; Dhillon 2007).

Popular concern with this alleged crisis also constitutes a crucial context for this thesis. I do not aim to provide a detailed exposition of Egypt’s alleged marriage crisis. I do, however, seek to apprehend the profound sense of anxiety and uncertainty which surrounds the cultivation of marriage amongst Cairene Muslims and to explore the many ways in which Cairene Muslims endeavour to manage such emotions. In this respect, reference to Egypt’s marriage crisis is rather apposite.

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6 Researcher, Navjtev Dhillon (2007), describes the financial obstacles to marriage in the Middle East as a ‘social time bomb’, academic, Dianne Singerman (2007) speaks of Egyptian youth suspended in a state of unwanted ‘waithood’.

7 The interested reader might wish to refer to Kholoussy (2010), Lindsey (2010) and Hasso (2011) for further analysis of this crisis.
Indeed I would suggest that it is not entirely surprising that, in a context in which divorce in the early years of marriage is a source of public concern and in which many complain that their ability to marry is compromised by their financial circumstances, that feelings of anxiety and uncertainty with reference to the process of selecting a spouse might be particularly pronounced.

The Legal Context

It is important to highlight that issues of personal status occupy a peculiarly complex and interesting position within Egyptian law. Indeed, in common with Mahmood (2012), I would suggest that attempts to reform family law are often particularly sensitive precisely because questions over the legitimacy of the state’s jurisdiction over such matters are more pronounced in this domain than in any other. This, it might be argued, is linked to the nature of Egypt’s experience of secularization, a process described in great detail by Talal Asad (2003), but which saw the loss of the religious authorities’ ‘jurisdiction over criminal and commercial cases’ (Asad 2003: 211) over sixty years prior to the curtailment of their authority over matters of personal status (Brown 1997).

The fieldwork for this thesis took place in the aftermath of a series of legislative and procedural reforms pertaining to marriage. Chief amongst these was the introduction of a new version of the Egyptian standardised Islamic marriage contract in 2000. I write about the new marriage contract in greater detail in Chapter Five. For now, I highlight that the new version of the standardised contract includes space in which couples can, within limits, stipulate the terms of their union. This adjustment to the standardised contract was preceded by a rather controversial campaign by a collection of feminist activists who, informed by historical research, argued that in the early Twentieth Century marriage contracts in Egypt began to lose their ‘contractual features’ (Zulficar 2008:235) and that this has implications for women’s position within the marital union.
In the same year, ‘Law No. 1/2000 on the Reorganisation of Certain Terms and Procedures of Litigation in Personal Status Matters’ (Sonneveld 2006: 51) was passed. This law included Article 20 which greatly expanded Egyptian women’s access to divorce. Whereas previously a woman’s ability to initiate divorce was contingent upon her ability either to prove that her husband had previously given her permission to divorce of her own accord (‘iṣna) or her ability to prove harm to the satisfaction of the courts, the passing of Article 20 meant that women, on the provision that they returned the muGaddam and surrendered their right to the muTaxxar and the alimony, were able to initiate a kind of unilateral no-fault divorce known as khul’ (Singerman 2005; Al Sharmani 2010; Zulficar 2008; Cuno 2008). This expansion in women’s access to divorce, needless to say, met with strong and vociferous opposition. Indeed, media pundits warned that the passing of this legislation would lead to ‘skyrocketing divorce rates’ and would culminate in the ‘breakdown of the Egyptian family and, hence that of society’ (Sonneveld 2006: 51). Such opposition has also meant that women who seek to initiate khul’ are often stigmatised (Sonneveld 2006). Yet, legal anthropologist, Mulki Al Sharmani (2010) demonstrates that women are, despite such stigma, still filing for this kind of divorce and provides a fascinating account of how the legislation which surrounds khul’ is currently being implemented in the courts.

The fieldwork for this thesis, then, took place in a context of significant legislative and procedural change. Yet it also took place at a time when unregistered marriages were a source of intense public and political concern. This is an issue that will be addressed further in Chapter Six but speaks to concerns with the moral state of the nation, the vulnerability of women within Egyptian families and the incomplete nature of the state’s regulation of the intimate lives of its citizens (Hasso 2011; Abaza 2001; Zubaida 2003).

The Importance of Islam and Propriety

In Politics of Piety, Saba Mahmood notes that an ‘Islamic Revival or Islamic Awakening (al Sahwa al Islamiyya)... has swept the Muslim world, including Egypt,
since at least the 1970s’ (Mahmood 2005: 3). And whilst the term ‘Islamic Revival’ is frequently associated with the state-oriented activities of groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood, it is also used to refer to ‘a religious ethos or sensibility that has developed within contemporary Muslim societies’ (Mahmood 2005: 3). Upon entering the ‘field’, much like Mahmood (2005), Hirschkind (2006) and others, I found that ‘this sensibility has a palpable public presence in Egypt’ (Mahmood 2005: 3). This is reflected in the way that many women now dress, the way that many people greet one another (many Cairene Muslims choose not to shake hands with unrelated persons of opposite sex and purposefully utilize salutations with religious connotations), and the ever-growing popularity of cassette sermons and other forms of religious education. 8

The aforementioned sensibility is of course made manifest in a variety of other quotidian contexts and activities but, for the purpose of this thesis, I should emphasise that a religious sensibility is evident in the way that many Cairene Muslims plan, prepare and speak about marriage. Indeed in the course of fieldwork, I was privy to a number of debates about the religious legitimacy of a variety of practices associated with the cultivation of marriage. I was, for example, witness to a rather heated debate amongst my language exchange partner and two of her female friends about whether the act of ululation (zaghrada) was religiously legitimate. On the one hand, my language exchange argued that ululation facilitated the achievement of al-ishhār (broadcast / announcement), a sunni condition for the religious legitimacy of a union, and was therefore an act of virtue. Two of her friends, however, countered that there were many other ways of achieving al-ishhār and that it was ḥarām (forbidden) for a woman to raise her voice in this manner. And this provoked a subsequent debate about where the view that a woman’s voice was somehow problematic originated.

This kind of conversation is, it should be noted, utterly mundane amongst certain circles of Cairene Muslims and, as Charles Hirschkind has argued, is generally premised upon the assumption that all are concerned with ‘correct Islamic practice’ (Hirschkind 2001: 9) and often serves to highlight the extent of many ordinary,

8 See Fadil (2009) and Deeb (2006) for a fascinating discussion on hand-shaking in Islam.
Cairene Muslims’ knowledge about Islam. In accordance with Talal Asad (1986), I would argue that the fact that these kinds of conversation take place serves to demonstrate, once again, that the religious views of Muslims are far from homogenous. This sense of heterogeneity in religious outlook was vividly illustrated in debates about the religious legitimacy of unregistered marriage (gawaaz al-erfee), a topic that has acquired a particularly prominent position in public discourse about marriage and that will be explored further in Chapter Six.

A concern with religious observance surfaced again in conversations about a number of other phenomena related to marriage, including bridal make-up, wedding dresses, marital jewellery and savings accounts. Whilst such phenomena might, at first glance, appear rather profane in nature, in discussions about these topics my informants would, at times, draw attention to the religious significance of specific choices. In the course of fieldwork it soon became apparent that the way in which a bride is beautified holds implications for her perceived propriety and religiosity. Indeed a number of beauticians commented that they tend to apply a great deal of white powder upon the faces of their bridal customers. At first, I automatically and quite erroneously assumed that this might be a ‘post-colonial thing’, but I nonetheless decided to ask why this tendency existed, and was patiently told that a pale face was seen as symbolic of innocence. The assumption is that whereas a pale woman has been hidden away at home, a woman with a darker complexion has led a less secluded existence, she has been exposed to the sun. Of course, some skin types are naturally paler than others but, in this context, paleness is often, at least symbolically, associated with innocence and this can affect the way in which bridal make-up is applied.

However, I was also told that some bridal customers ask for their make-up to be applied very lightly. When I enquired why such requests were made, I received a rather interesting response. Whilst some stated this was simply custom, two of the beauticians I spoke with explained that it is very important for a bride to convey a positive image and that heavy make-up might give the wrong impression. Heavy make-up is often seen as indicative of a neglect of religious duty as the various
ablutions associated with Islamic prayer means that heavy make-up is somewhat impractical for the pious Muslim woman.

A concern with the religious legitimacy and broader social propriety of one’s conduct also shapes the way in which many Cairene Muslims interact with unrelated persons of the opposite sex. In the course of fieldwork I was repeatedly surprised by the sheer diversity of perspectives on what constitutes ‘respectable’ conduct in contemporary Cairo. A vast majority of my informants believed that interaction between men and women is fine as long as it is directed towards the pursuit of a professional, educational or charitable objective. And in accordance with this logic, a number of my female friends who had become acquainted with unrelated men in this way would assiduously refer to these male acquaintances as colleagues (zamaail) as opposed to friends (aṣḥaab). A few of my male acquaintances would do likewise. This appeared to be the case even when the content of their conversations and the nature of their relationship seemed to extend far beyond its stated purpose. In doing so, they made a rather public statement about the propriety of their conduct; they engage in mixed-sex interaction out of necessity and not, as the use of the term ṣaḥib (friend) would imply, for the purpose of recreation. Cairene Muslims who adopt this approach to mixed-sex interaction are often very careful about where such interaction takes place. Indeed a conversation that would be considered perfectly respectable within the confines of, for example, a university canteen, would suddenly be deemed improper if conducted in a space that was somehow unrelated to the official purpose of the interlocutors’ interaction.

In an ethnographic study of the women’s mosque movement in Egypt, Saba Mahmood describes a discussion between a female preacher and some of her female followers about gender mixing (ikhtilāṭ). In common with a number of my informants, the female preacher described by Mahmood argued ‘you should only speak to them [unrelated men] out of necessity and not for any other reason’ (Mahmood 2005: 101). Mahmood proceeds to describe a debate about what constitutes necessary, and thus permissible, mixed sex interaction and draws attention to the fact that the discussion described was ‘squarely situated within the expectations generated by women’s access to education in postcolonial Egypt and the
presumption of their right to higher education’ (Mahmood 2005: 102). In a similar vein, I would suggest that the distinction that a number of my informants drew between legitimate and illegitimate mixing was very much shaped by the widespread, and contemporary, Egyptian belief that a pious Muslim woman may reasonably expect to have access to education and to engage in employment (see Abu-Lughod 1998; Amin 2005). I would also suggest that Cairene views about the propriety of mixed-sex interaction have a bearing upon the marriage-making process. Whilst the view that, one should only interact with persons of opposite sex out of necessity does prevent some Cairene Muslims from either forging or publicly declaring their friendship with, or courtship of, persons of opposite sex, it does mean that couples are able to become acquainted as colleagues, classmates or fellow volunteers before expressing an official interest in marriage.

However, not all those I encountered believed that one can only interact with persons of the opposite sex when absolutely necessary. Indeed, a number of my informants believe that it is perfectly permissible for an unrelated man and woman to forge a friendship but suggest that it is more ‘respectable’ if they spend time together in the company of other friends. However, the fact that the respectability of an encounter is, in part, contingent upon the presence of others can sometimes prove problematic. This is, perhaps, most vividly illustrated by the complaints of a friend of mine whom I shall call Nadia. Nadia would frequently complain that a friend of hers from school, Samaa, was as she put it ‘using’ her. Nadia described how Samaa would invite her out to the cinema, for coffee or to engage in various other leisure activities and, upon arrival, Nadia would invariably find that Samaa had also invited a male companion, Ali, and various other friends. According to Nadia, Samaa would then proceed to spend much of the evening engrossed in conversation with Ali and would neglect both Nadia herself and various other invited friends. And so, Nadia surmised that Samaa had ulterior motives for issuing such invitations, that Nadia’s presence was requested because it helped protect Samaa and Ali’s relationship from unflattering gossip. Nadia was, needless to say, less than happy about this. And whilst, at first glance, this entire drama might seem somewhat trivial, and Nadia most certainly provides a partial perspective on this affair, Nadia’s complaints do draw attention to
the kinds of tensions and dependencies that a cultural concern with the ‘respectability’ of mixed gender interactions can create.

I should, however, also note that a few Cairene Muslims believe that it is perfectly permissible for couples to go out alone in public prior to engagement. Yet some tend to be more discreet than others. The preceding paragraphs clearly illustrate that Cairene definitions of proper conduct are far from uniform. It is, I would argue, also important to note that Cairene definitions of propriety are greatly influenced by the ritual status of those concerned. Indeed in Chapter Five, I describe how the performance of *katb al-kitāb* (the writing of the contract) serves to ‘recalibrate the criteria and shift the ethical context’ (Lambek 2010: 56) by which the propriety of a couple’s interactions are judged. And for this reason, actions that may have been considered either improper or potentially controversial before the performance of *katb al-kitāb* come to be seen as proper and relatively uncontroversial after the execution of this key rite, and vice versa.

Yet however much a concern with the religious legitimacy and the social propriety of one’s actions might condition the cultivation of Islamic marriage in Cairo, in agreement with Samuli Schielke, I think it is important to note that ‘the vast majority of Muslims’, including those resident in Cairo, are ‘like most of humankind... sometimes but not always pious, at times immoral, and often undisciplined’ (Schielke 2009: 24). Hence whilst Islam might play a role in determining the ways in which many Muslims marry, it does not necessarily exert sovereign influence over this process.

**Revisiting Marriage**

In the course of conducting fieldwork, I was repeatedly struck by the unpredictable nature of spouse selection and alliance formation in Cairo. While revisiting the classic anthropological literature on marriage and alliance, I began to notice that the predictability or otherwise of spouse selection has been considered more generally for quite some time. In order to illustrate this point, I turn to *The Elementary*
**Structures of Kinship** by Lévi-Strauss. This most seminal of texts focuses upon the jural rules and classificatory systems associated with marriage and pays rather scant attention to actual behaviour or experience. As a consequence of its focus on categories of marriageability, it in many ways, serves to clothe particular forms of spouse selection and alliance formation with an aura of inevitability. In the preface to the first edition of *Elementary Structures*, Lévi-Strauss concedes that ‘only exceptionally can a system determine one sole individual as the prescribed spouse’ (Lévi-Strauss 1969: xiii). Lévi-Strauss thus implies that while in certain contexts the anthropologist might be able to predict spouse selection in categorical terms (that is he/she might be able to predict which category or group ego will marry), the anthropologist’s ability to determine which specific individual a person will marry is far from given.

The possible predictability of spouse selection has been further undermined by anthropological work pointing to the potential for discrepancy between kinship ideology (terminological structures and jural rules) and kinship behaviour (Bourdieu 1977; Good 1981; Barnard & Good 1984). In an article on *Prescription, Preference and Practice: Marriage Patterns Among the Kondiyankottai Maravar of South India*, Anthony Good clearly demonstrates that a community’s members do not inevitably comply with the expectations engendered by that community’s marital prescriptions and preferences. He therefore suggests that knowledge of the jural rules and classificatory structures which pertain to spouse selection within a given community do not, in and of themselves, allow one to definitively determine the actual nature of selections made (Good 1981).

In a similar vein, Pierre Bourdieu presents a powerful critique of anthropological work which seeks to discern the forces which command spouse selection and alliance formation from genealogical data alone. He argues that such an approach is fundamentally flawed. It forgets ‘all that is implied in extracting from the product the principles of its production’ (Bourdieu 1977: 36) and therefore demonstrates a tendency to overestimate the effect of rules upon social conduct. This kind of approach also predisposes the analyst to inadvertently overlook cases in which a relationship has been retrospectively recategorised in order to create a semblance of
conformity to official norms. He thus advocates a more diachronic approach to the study of kinship that pays due attention to the effects that material and symbolic factors have upon the construction, perpetuation and destruction of relationships. He also draws attention to the fact that official discourse on kinship, which he notes ‘informants are inclined to present ... as long as they see themselves as spokesmen mandated to present the group’s official account of itself’ (Bourdieu 1977: 37), does not always chime with kinship as lived reality.

By focusing upon concrete and specific examples of lived kinship and by paying heed to Bourdieu’s warning about the analytic risks associated with ‘extracting from the product the principles of its production’ (Bourdieu 1977: 36), we begin to see that spouse selection and alliance formation are much less predictable, both in terms of process and outcome, than more formalist approaches to the study of kinship would have us believe. Indeed I would suggest that this approach to the study of marriage meant that I was made acutely aware of the fact that the marriage-making process in Cairo does not always unfold in a straightforward and orderly manner, that marriage-making is a fragile and unpredictable process that can entail the refusal of proposals, temporary impasses and the breakdown of engagements. While such realities are often occluded when marriage comes to be represented in diagrammatic form they are highlighted here as they constitute a significant feature of the relational histories of my informants and because, in my view, they allow for a more nuanced and less idealised vision of the ways in which marriages are in fact produced.

An emphasis upon process and experience and a commitment to avoiding the ‘naive legalism’ that Bourdieu so convincingly criticises, allows for a broadening of the way in which one thinks about the predictability of spouse selection and marriage formation. While previous work has often considered this from an outsider’s perspective in terms of the anthropologist’s ability to construct accurate and representative models of the kinds of marriage contracted within a particular society, looking at marriage in more diachronic, concrete and specific terms and attending to the personal experiences of those involved encouraged me to think about marriage and predictability from a more emic standpoint. From this vantage point, predictability is considered in quite different terms. It is considered in terms of one’s
ability to determine the likelihood that a particular match will in fact result in marriage and in terms of one’s ability to assess if a particular marriage will result in a durable and satisfying union. An inability to predict these outcomes is seen to have a concrete effect upon one’s future wellbeing and is thus both a source of anxiety and something to be grappled with.

While a great deal of work in ‘new kinship studies’ has, with varying degrees of acknowledgement, been shaped by Bourdieu’s emphasis upon the importance of examining process and of avoiding the ‘naive legalism’ that has shaped so much of ‘old kinship studies’, the topic of marriage itself has been somewhat marginalised by this body of literature. In the remainder of this section I recapitulate a rather familiar narrative of the death and rebirth of kinship studies (Carsten 2000a, 2004; Franklin & McKinnon 2001). For the uninitiated reader this provides vital context for the current study and for those more acquainted with the literature, it offers an important reflection upon how the nature of kinship’s rebirth came to affect the study of marriage. The so-called demise of ‘old kinship studies’ is typically associated David Schneider’s work, A Critique of the Study of Kinship (Carsten 2004). However at the time this critique was published, 1984, kinship studies was already an ailing creature.

By 1984, authors such as J.A. Barnes (1980) had noted a marked decline in interest in the anthropological study of kinship. Growing numbers of scholars were, with the rise of ‘the new “anthropology of women” ... in the early 1970s’ (Moore 1988: 1), becoming increasing conscious of the androcentrism of anthropology’s engagement with the topic of kinship and evolutionist models of society were beginning to lose credibility (Schneider 1995). Added to this, as early as 1930, Malinowski had complained of ‘the bastard algebra of kinship’ (Malinowski 1930: 19) and had briefly pondered if there was something of a disconnect between the way kinship had been constructed in the academy and the way it was experienced in everyday life. And by 1984, the terminology and classifications used by kinship theorists seemed ever more numerous, abstract and abstruse.

But it was, one might argue, David Schneider who provided one of the most well-known and most provocative challenges to the way anthropologists had previously
‘done’ kinship. In *A Critique of the Study of Kinship*, Schneider asks why anthropological definitions of kinship have tended to centre around the ‘processes of human sexual reproduction’ (Schneider 1984: 165). He proceeds to suggest that anthropologists have tended to define kinship in this manner due to an implicit consensus that, ‘blood is thicker than water’ (Schneider 1984: 165), that relations which ‘arise out of the processes of sexual reproduction’ (Schneider 1984: 165) are everywhere imbued with a special significance and with a supreme strength. Schneider moves onto argue that the validity of this premise, that is the cross-cultural importance of reproduction to social bonding, cannot be implicitly assumed but must instead be placed under empirical scrutiny. He noted that the Yap of the North Caroline Islands place ‘little value on sexual intercourse as having anything to do with the bonds between persons’ and ‘place minimal value on reproduction in relating persons or statuses’ (Schneider 1984: 132). And so it seems that the belief that relationships which ‘arise out of the processes of sexual reproduction’ are somehow distinct from and stronger than any other form of relationship is far from universal. For this reason, Schneider provocatively suggests that the ‘comparative study of kinship must be either set on some other, firmer ground, or abandoned’ (Schneider 1984: 177).

One of the most influential responses to Schneider’s critique comes from Janet Carsten. In accordance with Schneider, Carsten argued that anthropological definitions of kinship had been underpinned by the erroneous assumption that all cultures, everywhere, attribute supreme value to relationships ‘derived from acts of procreation’ and that this assumption had inhibited the ability of anthropologists to discover the ‘culturally specific meaning and value of kinship’ (Carsten 1995: 236) within their chosen fieldsite. Yet according to Carsten, this does not mean that we should abandon kinship studies altogether. Instead, anthropologists should adopt a more flexible definition of kinship that is able to accommodate to indigenous conceptions and experiences of relatedness which, it should be noted, may accord significance to bonds generated through activities other than procreation.

Carsten also highlights that whilst Schneider’s work does much to illuminate the ethnocentrism of previous anthropological approaches to the study of kinship, it is
not itself completely devoid of ethnocentrism. Indeed Schneider’s analysis is based upon an unquestioned separation and opposition between social and biological dimensions of relatedness and not all cultures make such a distinction. For example the Malays of Langkawi believe that two previously unrelated individuals can, through repeatedly eating rice-meals at the same hearth, come to share the same bodily substance, and in this manner they may eventually come to be considered as kin. And so we see that for the Malays of Langkawi kinship is not definitively determined at birth and that ‘it makes little sense in indigenous terms to label’ some aspects of kinship ‘social and others as biological’ (Carsten 1995: 236).  

In the years that have followed much of what has been called ‘new kinship studies’ has centred around two key projects. First, many such studies have revolved around demonstrating either the absence or fuzziness of a distinction between social and biological kinship within specific cultures. Second, many such studies have also or alternatively sought to challenge the belief that so-called ‘biological’ ties are pre-given and permanent and that so-called ‘social’ ties are temporary and mutable and have served to highlight the optative nature of the former and the occasionally enduring nature of the latter.

Much of this work has sometimes consciously, sometimes less consciously, served to unsettle the taken for grantedness of ‘received moral wisdom’ (Clarke 2008: 154) and has frequently served to demonstrate ‘the possibility of transcending physically determined identity and the moral constraints it is supposed to entail’ (Clarke 2009: 209). It is therefore perhaps little surprise that in an interview about the anthropology of kinship, Schneider argued that feminist scholarship had played an important role in kinship studies’ ‘phoenix-like’ (Schneider 1995: 193) revival. Yet however much ‘new kinship studies’ has served to challenge previously naturalised truths, it does remain, in Kath Weston’s words, ‘suspiciously enamoured of biology, even in the critique’ (Weston 2001: 151). Indeed the literature is packed with studies on topics such as IVF, surrogate motherhood and adoption and some studies that may, at first, seem to be break away from this preoccupation with biology (e.g. Bodenhorn’s (2000) work on labour amongst the Inupiat) eventually conclude by stating that for

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9 An adapted version of the previous three paragraphs can be found in Walker (2009)
this specific group of people in this specific situation biology is irrelevant or takes on unusual significance and are, then, ultimately framed by a concern with biology.

And whilst of course some work on marriage has served to interrogate the distinction previous anthropologists have drawn between the social and the biological (see for example Inden and Nicholas 1977; Carsten 1997), I believe that the dominance of the two aforementioned frames within new kinship studies has led to the marginalisation of marriage. To put this another way, the topic of marriage does not obviously lend itself to the unsettling of the distinction ‘old kinship studies’ had previously drawn between the social and the biological. Marriage also does not obviously lend itself to the critique of the idea that biological ties are universally equated with a privileged sense of permanence. As these issues have animated so much of recent anthropological debate on kinship, it tends to be neglected. However, recent work on topics such as kinship and memory\textsuperscript{10} demonstrate that scholars within ‘new kinship studies’ are beginning to break away from the constraints that a preoccupation with problematising biology have placed upon post-Schneiderian work on kinship and it is hoped that this widening of the discussion will bring about a renaissance in the study of marriage.

The marginalisation of marriage within ‘new kinship studies’ might also be attributed to a \textit{prima facie} sense that there is nothing new, exciting or controversial about the study of marriage, and as Kath Weston has argued, the reconstituted field of ‘new kinship studies’ is in many ways orientated ‘towards controversy’ (Weston 2001: 150). Indeed, the seeming normativity of marriage might, paradoxically, have led to its relative neglect in post-Schneiderian work on kinship. However I should add one important caveat to this argument. By saying marriage has been marginalised by new kinship studies, I am definitely not saying that the topic of marriage has been altogether forgotten by anthropologists. Indeed scholarship ranging from John Borneman’s (1996) article on marriage, privilege and exclusion to Viveiros de Castro’s (2001) work on the ‘given’ and the ‘made’ in Amazonian sociatlity indicates that the topic of marriage has not been completely neglected by contemporary anthropological discourse. This thesis has drawn inspiration from

\textsuperscript{10} See for example Carsten (2007)
recent work examining topics as diverse as transnational marriage, consanguineal marriage, the legal dimensions of marriage and on so-called ‘love’ marriage. Whilst this thesis does not deal with transnational marriage per se, a number of ideas emerging out of this literature also apply to my work on marriage in Cairo. These include the role of the imagination in mediating the production of alliances, the influence of the state upon their formation and the importance of paying due attention to context (Vinea 2007; Breger & Hill 1998; Charsley 2012; Constable 2005; Karkabi 2011).

This thesis does pay close attention to legal aspects of marriage formation, and in common with other work on this topic, it highlights the potential for discrepancy between state and social recognition of marriage. Recent work on marriage and the law has also drawn particular attention to state involvement in intimate lives. Indeed many have highlighted how legal and bureaucratic processes can shape and regulate the production of intimacy (Hasso 2011; Mody 2008; Baron 1993; Kholloussy 2010; Charsley 2006). Many have also pointed to the protective potential of the law. It is important to stress, however, that these forms of state intervention and regulation are not imposed upon ‘power-neutral and regulation-free terrains’ (Hasso 2011: 172), that the state often competes with other institutional and societal actors, such as the church, for influence over this domain. Whilst this thesis is not principally about state governance of marriage, it does consider how practices such as the registration of a union, the writing of a marriage contract, and the writing of a safe-keeping contract known as the *Gayma* affect aspiring spouses access to state intervention in the event of conjugal dispute and how this inflects beliefs about the vulnerability of husbands and wives.

Concern about the vulnerability of wives and indeed husbands features in recent anthropological work on consanguineal marriage. Indeed more recent commentaries on both FBD marriage and kin marriage more generally have emphasised the fact that one of the key motives for forming such alliances is that they involve the creation of an alliance with persons who are already known and are therefore seen to reduce the risk that a marriage will be made on the basis of misinformation (Hoodfar 1997; Charsley 2007; Jeffery & Jeffery 1996; Donnan 1988; Sholkamy 2003). Whilst
kin marriage was not of particular concern to a vast majority of my informants, a concern with the knowledge which informed any selection most certainly was. As well as the aforementioned clusters of interest, recent anthropological works on matrimony have paid particular attention to so-called ‘love’ marriages (Hirsch & Wardlow 2006; van Eerdewijk 2006; Chan 2006; Abu-Lughod 1986; Mody 2008; Lindholm 2006). And whilst a significant proportion of the literature on ‘love’ marriage has tended to embed itself within theoretical discussions of and debates about globalisation and modernity, Perveez Mody’s work on love marriage in India demonstrates the potential for work on marriage to engage with and contribute to post-Schneiderian discussion of the ‘given’ and the ‘made’ within kinship and has been a particular source of inspiration for this thesis.

It is worth noting here that a significant portion of this recent scholarship on marriage has tended to foreground forms of marriage which the analysts themselves either implicitly or explicitly state is in some way novel or controversial. A great deal of scholarship within this field has, moreover, tended to privilege something else, such as globalisation, multiculturalism and/or legal pluralism, as its key object of analysis and, as a consequence, the theorisation of marriage itself has not always been of primary concern. So we see that recent work on marriage has not only been somewhat marginalised from new kinship studies but has also adopted a slightly skewed agenda. It is my view that by paying close attention to content and process, we can still say new and interesting things about marriage in a much broader and perhaps more representative range of contexts. I would further suggest that such an approach to the study of marriage means that we are better positioned to explore the affective dimension of this process and to enter into new debates about how ‘agency’ is experienced. I also argue that the tendency within kinship theory to explore or challenge the ‘givenness’ of biology has meant that we have, perhaps, neglected the fact that, for many peoples, facets of kinship that are ‘given’ are not necessarily or only biological but can also or alternatively be seen as divinely ordained. Whilst I only touch upon this issue very briefly in this thesis, this is an issue that I most certainly wish to pursue in future work. So my point is, is that whilst some work is beginning to push marriage out of the periphery of new kinship studies, there is great potential to undertake more work on this topic and we might find that doing so not
only serves to enrich our understanding of marriage but also allows us to ‘connect some different and less familiar dots’ (Weston 2001: 152).

**Methods**

The fieldwork for this thesis was undertaken from October 2009 to December 2010. I lived in a flat in the upper class neighbourhood of Zamalek with other foreign female students and adopted a multi-sited approach to fieldwork. Before beginning fieldwork, I had planned to spend much of my time in Cairo accompanying a handful of couples as they planned and prepared for marriage. I had intended to shadow couples and their families in the process of creating marriages and I hoped that this would involve witnessing everything from the issuing of a proposal, to the purchase of marital jewellery, and negotiation about the terms of a marriage. Yet, less than a week after beginning fieldwork I began to realise the naivety of this initial proposal.

It soon became apparent, as explained above, that the process of becoming married in Cairo was fraught with anxiety and uncertainty. Proposals were frequently refused, engagements often broke down and marriage-making was a delicate process which required skilful manoeuvring. As such, anything that could potentially unsettle this process, including the presence of unnecessary others, was to be carefully avoided. At first, this realisation was the cause of some alarm. If shadowing couples and their families as they issued proposals, found conjugal homes and negotiated the terms of a union was not necessarily possible, how else was I going to study marriage? Did I need to start thinking of a new topic of research? I had already spoken with my supervisors about undertaking fieldwork with various persons attached to the ‘wedding industry’. And so, I took a deep breath and, with the assistance of my language exchange, began determining if there was any disparity between modern standard Arabic and Egyptian colloquial Arabic terms for jewellery. About a week later, I began visiting jewellers, introducing myself and my research, and enquiring into the nature and significance of *ash-shabka* (marital jewellery) in Cairo. This resulted in some fascinating insights, which are presented in Chapter Five, and served as a useful introduction to fieldwork. Almost all of the jewellers I approached
actively welcomed my enquiries and many sat me down, offered me a cup of tea and
invited me to return if I had any further questions. This was the beginning of a series
of conversations with persons related to the wedding industry, described in further
detail later in this chapter.

At the same time, I told as many people as possible that I was conducting research on
marriage in Egypt. Quite often this gave rise to generic comments about the so-called
azmat al-gawaaz (marriage crisis) in Egypt but occasionally it resulted in fascinating
revelations about broken engagements, refused proposals and marriages currently in-
the-making. Over time, I found that a few of those acquaintances who at one point
had spoken about marriage in abstract and generic terms began to speak about their
own and their loved ones’ experiences in this domain. In many of these
conversations, I could not help but wonder if people would have been quite so open
if I had been Egyptian. In many ways, I think that my status as a westerner meant
that people were perhaps less concerned about discussing personal indiscretions and
actions that, in local terms, might be considered morally ambiguous. By the end of
fieldwork, I eventually concluded that whilst the anxiety and uncertainty which
surrounds the cultivation of Cairene marriage makes direct observation or witness of
certain events, for example the issuing of a proposal, somewhat difficult, it also
serves as a fascinating topic for analysis, which allows us to think about the
experience of individual agency in the production and destruction of relatedness. I
also came to appreciate the profound sensitivity of marriage in Egypt and the effect
that some of the disclosures I was privy to could have upon the reputations of my
informants themselves and of some of their associates. For this reason, I have taken
particular care to anonymise my informants through the use of pseudonyms and the
removal of identifying markers.

In retrospect, I now realise that two key people played a critical role in facilitating
my fieldwork. The first, a young business student whom I have called Hanan, was a
constant friend during my time in Cairo. I was first introduced to Hanan, through an
acquaintance I had made during my time undertaking intensive language training in
2008. This acquaintance told me that Hanan was looking to practise her spoken
English and as I was looking to improve my spoken Arabic, it seemed logical that we
should meet. Upon first hearing about my intention to research Egyptian marriage, Hanan asked if I had read John Gray’s *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus*. This, it seemed, was a very popular piece of literature and Arabic versions of this text could be found at book stalls throughout the city. It soon became apparent that self-help was a particular passion of Hanan’s and I was often coerced into spending mornings with her writing personal development plans and engaging in various other goal-setting activities. And whilst most of my plans centred around eventually acquiring a stimulating job that would provide some level of financial security, Hanan’s plans would always make some reference to the afterlife.

Hanan and I would also meet at least once a week in the ‘respectable’ location of Mostafa Hamid cultural centre to engage in language exchange. Much of our time was whiled away reading and discussing the content of a range of local women’s magazines. At one point, Hanan asked me if I had any English magazines that we could peruse together. I subsequently called my mother who duly posted some reading material. And so, one evening I found myself sitting in my bedroom wielding a pair of scissors and carefully removing mildly indecent photographs and potentially embarrassing feature articles from the pages of *Bella* and *Best*, the content of which was nonetheless a source of some bemusement for Hanan.

Hanan had welcomed me into her *shilla* (circle of friends) and these attempts at language exchange were frequently interrupted by friends and acquaintances of hers who would offer their greetings and, before we knew it, would pull up a chair and begin to talk. On such occasions, I was often asked how my research was progressing. At this point, I would tend to make a rather generic remark about my work with various persons attached to the wedding industry. Such remarks would often stimulate discussion and debate about things like the cost of marital jewellery but would occasionally lead such friends and acquaintances to share their stories about either their own or their relatives’ preparations for marriage, stories, that I would seek permission to later document.

In this way, such interruptions would prove to be unexpectedly informative. Hanan was perpetually late for our meetings and whilst, at first, this was a source of some frustration, I gradually begun to understand the factors which contributed to her
lateness and to acquire patience. I learnt that the sheer extent of traffic and congestion on Cairo’s streets made getting anywhere in a timely manner something of a challenge. I also learnt, through experience, that microbuses operate on a rather unpredictable schedule and so those who utilize this form of transport are less able to predict where they will be when. But most importantly I learnt that punctuality, in Cairo, is simply not valued to the same extent or interpreted in the same way as it is in the UK. Indeed, in contrast to my experience of life in the UK, being courteous in Cairo means prioritising a reluctance to end exchanges with others abruptly over a desire to be punctual. One who is abrupt is considered far more rude than one who arrives late. And this relativist understanding of punctuality made my relationship with Hanan as well as the act of living and working in Cairo considerably easier.

Over time I also began to realise that Hanan’s lateness was not only understandable but was also fortuitous. Somewhat habituated to Hanan’s lateness, I would always arrive at the cultural centre carrying a newspaper and would proceed to purchase a cup of tea, take a seat and read. However, this routine was often disturbed by friends and acquaintances to whom Hanan herself had introduced me. These friends and acquaintances would often strike up conversation and take a seat, and, on occasion, they would enquire into my research. At which point, they would often proffer advice, share information that they thought was ‘very important’ or, in hushed tones, begin to tell me about their own experiences, and whilst such conversations were completely unplanned they were often very insightful.

Besides Hanan, another individual whom I have called Marwa played a particularly important role in my research. I first met Marwa at a wedding dress shop in Haram. Marwa was an assistant at this shop and was extremely enthusiastic about my research. She was, she revealed, currently engaged, and thus possessed a personal interest in the topic of marriage. Marwa invited me to return to the shop ‘anytime’ and I did so on two occasions. On our third meeting, Marwa commented that she was due to leave her job in a few days and so invited me to visit her at home in Moneib, a neighbourhood on the outskirts of Giza. She explained that she had more to tell me about marriage in Egypt. I subsequently visited Marwa’s home and met her siblings and a number of other members of her family. Marwa also introduced me to a
number of her neighbours, one of whom was kind enough to invite me to her wedding. Marwa became a close friend and informant and I was, unfortunately, to bear witness to the breakdown of her engagement, an experience that is discussed in further detail in Chapter Four of this thesis, and served to underline the vulnerability of prospective affines.

As part of fieldwork, I also spent considerable time exploring the Egyptian wedding industry. This involved visiting jewellers, beauty parlours and dress shops in order to speak about the *shabka* (marital jewellery), learn about bridal make-up and discuss wedding dresses with the professionals. It also involved visits to wedding photographers and to elite wedding planners, the latter of whom proved to be particularly knowledgeable. As part of this project I also spoke with estate agents and vendors of furnishing and household goods, and whilst one might not immediately associate such individuals with marriage *per se*, the provision of a suitable home and the acquisition of a bridal trousseau are integral to the process of preparing for marriage in Egypt, and as such, these individuals were able to enrich my understanding of the marriage-making process. And finally, this project involved speaking with *ma'dhūnīn* (registrars) about the registration of marriage.

Such professionals displayed remarkable willingness to share their expertise with me and upon hearing about my project, many would offer me a seat, summon someone to fetch us a cup of tea or a glass of coke and begin talking. It seemed that many of these professionals actively enjoyed the opportunity to discuss their work and I suspect that for those who found that custom was often slow, I presented a welcome distraction. In a few instances, these individuals went out of their way to assist me. For example, one registrar invited me to observe him officiate a union and subsequently arranged for me to spend a couple of evenings observing contract-writing ceremonies at *mushykat al-aʿzhar*. On another occasion, an estate agent insisted that I meet his daughter. She subsequently invited me to join her whilst she collected her brother from a nearby sporting club and in a rather surreal turn of events proceeded to speak at length about her ideal spouse whilst contending with Cairo’s congested streets. As mentioned earlier, one salesperson at a wedding dress shop not only shared her expertise on bridal wear but also invited me to her home,
introduced me to her family and neighbours and became a close friend and informant.

Such forays outside the wedding industry were highly productive and allowed me to gain a slightly broader and perhaps more intimate perspective on the nature of marriage-making in Cairo. And so, my work with the wedding industry was supplemented by a range of other activities that placed me in contact with persons who were willing to share their experiences of, and views about, the cultivation of marriage in Cairo. As mentioned earlier, at least once a week I would meet up with a young business student, whom I have called Hanan to engage in language exchange. Hanan had welcomed me into her shilla (friendship group) and I was often invited to join her and her friends as they celebrated birthdays, revised for examinations and generally spent time together at the Cultural Centre. And as previously noted, a number of these friends offered their thoughts and opinions on a range of issues relating to my research.

The Cultural Centre often hosted lectures and seminars on topics relating to marriage. A particularly memorable lecture was delivered by the author of the best-selling novel *I want to marry*, Ghada Abd El Aal, the content of which will be discussed in further depth in Chapter One of this thesis. Other lectures carried titles such as ‘Spinsterhood: The Cannonball of our Age’, ‘Co-operation and Marriage’ and ‘Women and Islam’. Such lectures often allowed time for audience participation and the discussions which ensued tended to be both lively in nature and lengthy in duration. Whilst the content of these lectures was vexingly familiar, attendance at such events offered me the opportunity to meet Egyptians interested in the topic of marriage, a few of whom were particularly eager to participate in my research.

I also attended a local women’s group, which I first encountered whilst shopping at a charity fair that they had organised. This group was attended by a diverse bunch of older, elite women and very much reminded me of the Women’s Institute in the UK. Whilst some members of this group were slightly bemused by my interest in researching Egyptian marriage, they nonetheless welcomed me into their group. A
few members did, however, take an active interest in my research and would often enquire into its progress and offer useful advice. Five members, in fact, agreed to meet up with me to discuss their own experiences of and views about marriage in greater depth.

I was also fortunate enough to have spent a summer living in Cairo in 2008 and a friend whom I had made during that period not only taught me about the pressures placed upon single women but also placed me in contact with a few of her friends and colleagues who had heard about my research and were willing to discuss their own experience of preparing for marriage. Introductions such as these were invaluable but, as we will see, so too were random, chance meetings with individuals who happened to be in the process of getting married.

**A Roadmap to this Thesis**

In the last few decades, anthropological studies of kinship have placed considerable emphasis upon the role of the individual in creating, maintaining and destroying relatedness. Indeed many studies have pointed to ‘the possibility of transcending physically determined identity and the moral constraints it is supposed to entail’ (Clarke 2009: 209) and of constituting relatedness in a manner which defies social, cultural and religious norms in other important respects. However, in my view, more work is required to consider how more normative forms of relatedness are produced and to consider and explore the ambiguities of agency within the field of kinship. Drawing inspiration from Perveez Mody’s (2008) work on the agency of love-marriage couples in India, this thesis examines how the agency of prospective affines in Cairo is complicated by incomplete knowledge and by the issue of accountability. My reflection upon this theme is, in many ways, informed by Hannah Arendt’s work on human action.

This thesis begins with a chapter about the process of selecting a spouse in Cairo. In this chapter, I discuss love and living-room marriage (*gawaaz al-ḥubb* and *gawaaz aṣ-ṣaloon* respectively). The distinction between these two modes of spouse
selection was not, for my informants, about who has the power to decide upon a
match, but instead about the nature and extent of the acquaintanceship that a couple
forge before a proposal is proffered. This is explained in further detail in Chapter
One. I also discuss Cairene concepts of purity and propriety, definitions of and views
about homogamous marriages and the process of vetting one’s prospective affines.
The vetting process is considered in light of the urban nature of this fieldsite. At the
heart of this chapter, and indeed this entire thesis, lies a concern with knowledge and
ignorance, and I aim to both engage with and contribute to the growing body of
anthropological literature on this theme. Recent anthropological literature on
ignorance has tended to foreground the fact that the achievement of knowledge is not
necessarily viewed in an unambiguously positive light (Romain 2012; Chua 2009;
Mair et al 2012; Strathern 2000, 2006). This was certainly the case for those in the
process of selecting a spouse in Cairo. Indeed my informants claimed that while
knowledge of a potential partner enhanced one’s ability to discern the probable
durability and contentment of a particular match and was thus considered to temper
the risk of unknowingly becoming part of an unhappy or untenable union, they also
believed that one of the chief avenues for gaining that knowledge, intense and
intimate acquaintanceship, was not itself devoid of risk. Indeed the process of
acquiring this kind of knowledge was perceived to hold the potential to harm one’s
future marriageability and the success of any future relationships. This was tied to
local conceptions of purity and propriety and, as I discuss in this chapter, these were
highly gendered. While informants found other ways of gaining information about a
potential match and used other strategies to assess their likely compatibility, they
knew that they could never be certain of the outcome of a given match and thus this
process was often fraught with anxiety and uncertainty. It was thus coloured by a
concern that one might be about to make an unwise choice.

In Chapter Two, I consider one of the key ways in which many Cairene Muslims
grapple with this burden. I consider the role of a ritual named Ṣalāt al-istikhāra, in
alleviating the uncertainty which surrounds conjugal decision-making and reveal that
the process of selecting a spouse is far more open-ended and far less predictable than
one might, at first, imagine. Ṣalāt al-istikhāra is a particular form of Islamic prayer in
which God’s direction is sought when one is uncertain about two permissible courses
of action. In this chapter I describe how the performance of Salāt al-istikhāra entered into and came to affect a number of my informants’ relational trajectories. While in recent years, anthropological work on kinship has stressed the role of the individual in creating and erasing relatedness, in this chapter I point out that those who perform Salāt al-istikhāra are acutely aware of their agency over the cultivation and destruction of kinship but that this agency was a source of intense anxiety due to a perceived deficit in knowledge. I describe how those who perform Salāt al-istikhāra surrender themselves to an omniscient and omnipotent God, asking for His guidance. In so doing, I reflect upon fatalism in Islam and describe how in some cases this act of surrender serves to create a sense of clarity and confidence, yet in other cases it produces rather disappointing results. I suggest that the escape from uncertainty that Salāt al-istikhāra is believed to offer is considered to be rather exclusive in nature. Ultimately, this chapter seeks to compensate for a paucity of literature on the role of Salāt al-istikhāra in the cultivation of marriage amongst Muslims in Egypt and elsewhere.

In Chapter Three, I turn to the rather more profane topic of marital jewellery. In this chapter, the knowability of one’s conjugal future remains an important theme. I examine the role of jewellery in discerning the seriousness of the groom’s intentions and in providing a prospective bride with some level of financial protection from some of the material hardships associated with widowhood and divorce and with unexpected pecuniary pressures within the marriage. I point out that marital jewellery is also vested with the role of symbolising, cementing and commemorating a given union and argue that this seeming duality of the role of marital jewellery serves to illuminate the ambivalence and uncertainty which surrounds the cultivation of marriage in Cairo.

I examine my informants’ discussions about and dealings with houses and with trousseaus in Chapter Four. While previous work has illustrated how a house can shape the relationships of its occupants (Carsten 1995; Tan 2001; Bloch 1995; Miller 2001), in this chapter I describe how houses can shape the cultivation of relatedness before cohabitation has even begun. I describe how houses and the objects contained within them shape prognoses about one’s own or one’s loved one’s conjugal futures.
I explain how the location of a couple’s post-marital residence comes to shape perceptions of the desirability and viability of a particular union. I also explain the significance of a prospective groom (and his kin’s) provision of a home to marital decision-making. I argue that a home of ‘suitable’ standard is believed to, at least partially, foretell a man’s future ability to act as a protective provider and to have a concrete impact upon quality of life after matrimony. Homes thus constitute an important element of marital negotiations. I also describe the trousseau’s role in preparing a bride for married life. Ultimately, I suggest that the house and the trousseau inform the way in which conjugal futures are imagined and that this plays a significant role in informing decisions about when and whom to marry.

In Chapter Five I move on to discuss the registration of Islamic marriage in Cairo. I discuss the potential for discrepancy between legal and public recognition of marriage. Drawing upon Michael Lambek’s (2010) work on the relationship between ritual and ethical evaluation, I describe how the act of registering a marriage can produce certain forms of freedom and protection, while at the same time creating new forms of vulnerability and constraint. I also provide a detailed description of the Egyptian standardised Islamic marriage contract. In 2000, a new version of this contract was introduced which granted couples the opportunity to specify, within limits, their own terms for marriage. While such an act might be seen to attenuate the unpredictability of life after marriage, this is not without cost. A request to add extra conditions to one’s contract can be construed as an insult and thus runs the risk of damaging or destroying the very relationship that one is seeking to construct. Similarly, much as the appointment of official witnesses might bolster the integrity of an agreement, this is not, in and of itself, devoid of risk. Indeed a witness’s discretion about the sometimes rather sensitive details of a particular contract cannot be guaranteed. This sense that the process of avoiding risk is not without risk, runs throughout this chapter and I suggest that an awareness of this dynamic serves two key functions. First, it helps advance our understanding of the anxiety and uncertainty which so often pervaded the cultivation of marriage in Cairo. And secondly, it helps us comprehend why certain forms of ‘protective’ practice are actively eschewed.
I continue to reflect upon the theme of protection in Chapter Six, but here I explore this theme in relation to a document known as al- Gayma (the list), a celebration known as yoom at-tangeed (day of upholstery) and a practice known as gawaaz al-erfee (unregisterd marriage). In so doing, I engage with anthropological work on transparency and accountability. While one might argue that accountability is a past-oriented activity concerned with the explanation of or responsibility for acts that have already been performed, I would contend that the anticipation of future accountability serves to shape our actions in the present, and that it is this dimension of accountability that is put to work when, for example, a bride publicly displays her trousseau during a celebration known as yoom at-tangeed (day of upholstery). In this chapter I put forward four key arguments. Firstly, I suggest that the production of witness may be viewed as a form of pre-emptive protection, and I propose that the desire for transparency is, in the context under study, at least partially gendered. Secondly, I emphasise the importance of considering transparency both from the perspective of what is being made visible and from the perspective of who is made privy to such visibility. I demonstrate how certain forms of visibility can be tied to others and discuss some of the implications of this with reference to the topic of marriage registration. Thirdly, I suggest that anthropological literature on transparency and accountability would perhaps benefit from greater consideration of the relationship between trust and vulnerability. Ultimately, I suggest that the fact that concerns with transparency, accountability, trust and protection are such prominent factors in the making of marriage in Egypt, serves to further underline both the vulnerability of prospective affines and the uncertainty and disquiet that so frequently pervades this process.

I conclude this thesis with a critical reflection on Arendt’s work on human action and unpredictability. In a fascinating discussion on the nature of human action, Arendt writes; ‘he who acts never quite knows what he is doing, that he always becomes “guilty” of consequences he never intended or even foresaw, that no matter how disastrous and unexpected the consequences of his deed he can never undo it, that the process he starts is never consummated unequivocally in one single deed or event’ (Arendt 1958: 233). In other words, human action is intrinsically unpredictable and irreversible. Whilst I broadly concur with this statement, I suggest that Arendt puts
forward a rather undifferentiated portrayal of these ‘burdens’ or ‘predicaments’. While unpredictability and irreversibility might be a property common to all human action, I propose that this burden might be *construed* to weigh more heavily in some situations that in others. I argue that the anxiety induced by consciousness of such burden is particularly pronounced in the context under study and this I suggest is linked to two key phenomena. First, an interest in upholding modest and appropriate conduct is seen to limit the types of knowledge one can gain about a prospective spouse and this is seen to intensify the indeterminacy of the long term consequences of a given match. Second, decisions about whom to marry are conceived to have particularly ‘fateful’ consequences. They are deemed to exert a profound effect upon one’s future well-being and even if one obtains a divorce, one must still deal with the material, interpersonal and other ramifications of one’s initial decision. It is thus, hardly surprising that the act of selecting a spouse is so freighted with anxiety.

This discussion of the unpredictability and irreversibility of human action does, of course, have implications for the way we think about the agency of the actor. Indeed Arendt points out that an agent unable to determine the far-reaching consequences of his or her actions and unable to undo those activities of one’s own accord might seem, at times, ‘much more the victim and the sufferer than the author and doer of what he has done’ (Arendt 1958: 233). The notion that agency might possess a ‘double edge’ is, as will be elaborated later in this thesis, also noted by Alfred Gell (1992) and Perveez Mody (2008) and in the course of this thesis I illustrate the profound pertinence of this work to the current study of marriage in Egypt. Yet, ultimately I suggest that an attentiveness to the ambiguities of agency helps us understand something of the anxiety and uncertainty which surrounds the marriage-making process in Cairo.
In recent years, Marilyn Strathern (2000, 2006), Jonathan Mair and others (Mair et al 2012) have drawn attention to the fact that the acquisition of knowledge is not always viewed in an unambiguously positive light. In ethnographic analyses of topics ranging from the freezing of ova in California (Romain 2012) to decisions about ritual practice in Malaysian Borneo (Chua 2009), anthropologists have began to demonstrate that in certain circumstances, specific forms of ignorance might be actively desired and consciously cultivated. Some have also pointed to the fact that ignorance itself might incorporate and indeed be created by ‘certain knowledge, logics, ethics, emotions and social relationships’ (Mair et al 2012: 19) and this has, in my view, served to ‘thicken’ our understanding of ‘not-knowing’.

‘Not-knowing’ emerged as a prominent theme in my informants’ accounts of the process of selecting a spouse in Cairo. For many of my informants, the process of selecting a spouse was perved by anxiety, uncertainty and difficulty. The key paradox was this; my informants believed that knowledge of a prospective spouse improved one’s ability to determine the likely happiness and longevity of a given union and thus helped reduce the risk of unwittingly entering into an unhappy or untenable relationship. Yet, at the very same time, one of the key means of achieving that knowledge, intense and intimate acquaintanceship, was in and of itself perceived to be laden with risk and required careful regulation. Indeed the process of getting to know another was considered to carry the potential to adversely affect both one’s perceived eligibility and the success of any future relationships. This was linked to culturally particular perceptions of purity and propriety and affected men and women in different ways. The acquisition of knowledge about a prospective spouse was, then, viewed with considerable ambivalence.

Various strategies, such as the gathering of information about a prospective spouse through third party sources and titbits of cultural advice, such as the widespread belief that homogamous unions are more likely to be happy and long-lasting, offered some reassurance. Yet beyond that, my informants recognised that however much
they tried, they would never really know a prospective spouse, and even if they did, they could only ever estimate the long-term outcome of a given match. They therefore faced the unsettling possibility that they had made an unwise choice.

**Between Love and Living Room Marriage**

In conversations about the process of selecting a spouse my informants made frequent reference to *gawaaz al-ḥubb* (love marriage) and *gawaaz aḥsaloon* (living room marriage). Yet what do these labels actually mean? Can they be used interchangeably or do they refer to different phenomena? My informants claimed that these labels referred to two different modes of selecting a spouse. This distinction between love and living room marriage was not, for my informants, about *who* has the agency to make the actual decision but was instead about *when* and *how* such selections took place. Whilst informants who labelled their relationships as love marriages had cultivated a sense of significant communicative intimacy, be it through dating or friendship, with a prospective spouse before a proposal was issued, informants who labelled their relationships as living room marriages typically proffered a proposal before communicative intimacy had been forged.

I think it is important to stress that the way in which my informants spoke about love and living room marriages differed quite significantly from the way that anthropologists have typically described the distinction between love and arranged marriage in places such as South Asia. Whilst definitions of love and arranged marriage (and their many hybrid forms) in South Asia might mention the point at which love enters into a relationship, they tend to centre around whether a given union transcends boundaries of class and caste and whether that union is a product of choices and actions driven primarily by the members of the couple themselves or by their elders (Uberoi & Singh 2006; Parry 2001; Mody 2008). In contrast, my informants’ definitions of love and living room marriage focused principally upon the nature and extent of pre-commitment contact. And for this reason, I think it is vital that we are cognizant of the fact that the meaning of love marriage can vary according to context.
It is, perhaps, useful here to describe the living room marriage in greater depth. I base this description upon an account given by a 24 year old fiancée, whom I will call Shymaa, and will highlight any significant points of variation with other informants’ accounts in the commentary. I first met Shymaa in the cafe of the Suzanne Mubarak public library in Doqqi. This was a place that had become something of a sanctuary to me as it served cheap food and drink, stocked a wide range of local and international newspapers and was relatively cool and quiet. It was, more importantly, one of a handful of ‘respectable’ places for a young woman to spend time alone in public. One afternoon, whilst eating a chip sandwich and trying to decipher a newspaper article about the cost of housing I was approached by a young woman who rather boldly enquired if I was American. Upon hearing that I was English she asked if I could look at a worksheet she had prepared for one of her students. I duly complied with this request and made a couple of corrections. We then began to talk. Following this initial encounter, Shymaa and I would frequently spend time together in the library cafe. Shymaa took a keen interest in my project and would often share her opinions about, and experience of, various issues surrounding marriage in Egypt. These conversations enriched my understanding of living room marriage and much else besides.

At the age of 24, Shymaa had already received many proposals. She was relatively conservative. So, whilst she had a warm working relationship with male colleagues, clients and classmates, she placed firm boundaries upon the kind of relationship she would forge with them. She would not spend time with them outside the workplace, would try to ensure that conversations did not stray too far from their shared work and study objective and always referred to them as colleagues or students. She did not believe in dating or mixed-gender friendships and so always imagined that she would eventually enter into a ‘living room marriage.’

Whilst attending a friend’s wedding Shymaa caught the eye of a twenty-seven year-old bachelor. He spoke to his mother, stating his interest, who subsequently spoke to various friends to find out a little more about her. She later asked one of the two families’ mutual friends if she would contact Shymaa’s family. This intermediary phoned Shymaa’s mother and arranged a visit. On the day of the visit, Shymaa
rushed home from work and set about helping her mother clean the house and getting herself beautified. When the doorbell rang, Shymaa made herself strategically scarce whilst her parents received the groom accompanied by his mother and her friend and welcomed them into their home. A few minutes later, Shymaa entered the living room and greeted the guests. She helped her mother serve cakes and coffee and listened to the conversation around her. The groom spoke a great deal about himself, mentioning his degree in business, his job in an office, his hopes for promotion and the fact that he had been saving for a flat. Shymaa commented that she desperately wanted to ask questions, but knew she was expected to remain quiet and subdued. So, she remained silent, responding to the occasional question or comment directed her way. At Abdel’s next visit their parents gave them a little space to speak amongst themselves and she was impressed by his kind and amusing temperament. After Abdel's third visit, their mutual friend called and declared Abdel would like to propose. Shortly thereafter, the couple got engaged and are now in the process of preparing for marriage.

I would like to highlight six key issues pertaining to Shymaa’s account of living room marriage. First, the fact that these initial meetings took place within Shymaa’s natal living room is no mere coincidence. Whilst the functions of the living room vary in relation to the size of one’s home, living rooms in Egypt are first and foremost spaces in which guests are received. And as the term itself implies, these early meetings conventionally take place in this relatively public space within the home. Interestingly, these kinds of living room encounters ordinarily take place in the natal abode of the bride as opposed to that of the groom. When I asked my informants why this was the case they almost universally shrugged their shoulders and stated that this was ‘custom’. However the fact that such meetings generally take place in the home of the bride generates an asymmetry in the kinds of information prospective affines are able to access in the early stages of introduction. Indeed, the groom and his companions might find that access to the prospective bride’s natal home places them in a position to acquire privileged information about the bride herself and indeed her family. A desire to manage the impressions gleaned from such

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1 She stated that if she had not made herself scarce, she would have appeared desperate.
insight informed Shymaa and her mother’s decision to clean and tidy before Abdel arrived.

Second, some more conservative (muḥāfiẓ) informants such as Shymaa tended to express a preference for living room marriage, whilst some of my more liberal informants had dabbled with both living room and love relationships. Such informants were not necessarily averse to dating or mixed-gender friendships, indeed one such individual had previously dated, but simply viewed living room marriage as another means of meeting a prospective spouse. However these informants did adopt a rather unorthodox approach to living room encounters. They would frequently suggest that the couple spend more time ‘getting to know one another’ before any formal decisions were made. In this way, they effectively blurred the distinction between love and living room marriage. That is, communicative intimacy could be cultivated before a formal proposal was proffered.

Shymaa’s fiancé’s approach to placing himself in a position to become better acquainted with her is particularly interesting. He had noticed Shymaa at a wedding but did not directly approach her there and then. When I asked why not, Shymaa explained that had he approached her in the absence of any form of introduction, she would have felt a little uneasy. He thus waited until after the wedding and then spoke to his mother to see if she could arrange a formal introduction. It is worth noting here that the fact that Shymaa’s fiancé had himself noticed her and actively decided to pursue a possible relationship was made quite explicit both when he sought his mother’s assistance in arranging an introduction and when Shymaa described her relationship to me and others. And this, it should be noted, contrasts quite significantly with anthropological accounts of arranged marriage in other geographical contexts (see for example, Mody 2008). But ultimately formal living room meetings allowed Abdel to get better acquainted with Shymaa in a ‘proper’, culturally acceptable fashion².

² A couple of other female informants described how they had told colleagues/clients/classmates to ‘speak to my father’ when they expressed a desire to become better acquainted with them. They were open to this possibility but were keen to assess the suitor’s seriousness and uphold their own marriageability.
It is worth highlighting that Abdel did not, at first, visit Shymaa’s family alone. Indeed he was accompanied by his mother and by a friend of both his and Shymaa’s family. The fact that Abdel was accompanied by his mother is far from unusual. In fact, this may be considered an archetypal feature of living room encounters and was readily explained by various female friends as a product of the fact that mothers had more experience with dealing with other women and were thus considered more adept at assessing the character of a prospective bride. A few added that the fact that a groom was accompanied by his mother had the added benefit of providing the bride with an opportunity to meet her prospective mother-in-law, a meeting which can influence the perceived viability of a given union.

Such considerations may help us understand the presence of Abdel’s mother but do little to explain the presence of his mother’s friend. As mentioned earlier, this friend had helped arrange an appointment between Abdel, Abdel’s mother and Shymaa and her parents. Pierre Bourdieu (1977) and Janet Carsten (1997) stress the importance of intermediaries in the cultivation of marriage in Morocco and Malaysia. They argue that within their respective field sites the issuing of proposals and the negotiation of the terms of a union are considered to be highly sensitive exchanges which carry significant potential for embarrassment. They suggest that intermediaries serve to diffuse some of the tension which surrounds these exchanges. Whilst Carsten (1997) emphasises the way in which intermediaries can help temper the impact of a rejection, Bourdieu (1977) emphasises the fact that when such exchanges do not go according to plan the concerned party can, if necessary, deny responsibility for the intermediary’s actions. In both these cases, intermediaries have a ‘neutralising effect’ (Carsten 1997: 216) upon these, often highly charged, exchanges.

I would add that intermediaries may also play a role in vouching for a given party and that this aspect of an intermediary’s role is especially relevant when two sets of prospective affines are not already known to one another. This was certainly the case for Shymaa who mentioned how before organising their introduction, her mother’s friend had described Abdel as handsome and educated/cultured (muthaqqa) and from a respectable family. It must be noted that whilst helping others get married is
seen as a noble thing to do and is perceived to result in *thawāb* (divine reward in the next life), the role of the intermediary is also considered to carry considerable responsibility. If either side rejects the other, or if there are any problems between the two parties, they are likely to be criticised. And so before introducing two sets of prospective affines to one another, the connecting individual is compelled to ensure that any endorsements made are genuine or, in the words of one informant, ‘*mish kallam farigh*’ (not empty talk). For this reason, a living room introduction arranged through a known and trusted friend, relative, or acquaintance is generally considered to be more promising than those arranged in a more direct fashion.

It is also interesting to note that during the first living room encounter, Shymaa felt compelled to act in a quiet and subdued fashion. In actual fact, she wanted to ask her now fiancé a number of questions but knew she was expected to remain subdued. The weight of social expectations had, at least for that encounter, limited her ability to get to know him. In fact, during that first encounter both parties appeared to be *acting* their part, he took great efforts to emphasise his ability to provide and she took pains to *appear* subdued. In this way, one might argue their first meeting was a kind of performance which served to ‘highlight the common, official values of the society’ (Goffman 1969:45).

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Shymaa’s fiancé proposed after just three visits. Many other informants commented that with living-room marriage one is expected to decide whether to propose or not after 3-5 visits. This was an aspect of living room marriages passionately criticised by young men who felt that such imperatives pressured prospective grooms to make premature decisions. Yet, this regulation of pre-commitment contact was linked to a desire to protect female purity and marriageability. Whilst Cairene attitudes towards and definitions of proper conduct are multiple and diverse, a number of my more conservative informants stated that communicative intimacy with an unrelated member of the opposite sex could adversely affect a woman’s marriageability and the success of future relationships. They often posited a distinction between men and women’s emotional constitution which placed different constraints upon their interpersonal conduct.
So, what of these different emotional constitutions? Men were seen as less likely to fall involuntarily in love and to be less profoundly affected by close communicative ties with women. Yet, more importantly men’s ability to fall in love was seen as independent of, and unaffected by, any past or present intimacies. Women, however, were seen as likely to become unsettled by close communicative ties with men and were considered to be more susceptible to falling into an irrational, all-consuming love. Such love was seen to sully a woman’s emotional purity and impair her ability to love again. Women were seen as more impressionable and it was believed that traces of past loves would leave their mark. A woman who had loved before was seen as somehow less receptive to falling fully in love again; she was somehow hardened. Hence, women who had loved before were considered, by some, to be less devoted to their husbands. It was also argued that the ties between an emotionally experienced woman and her husband were somehow weaker than those forged between an emotionally ‘pure’ woman and her husband. For these reasons some men stated that they were searching for a woman who had never been in a close relationship (be it a friendship or engagement) with an unrelated male. One female informant confessed that she had purged her phone of male mobile phone numbers for precisely this reason. This perception of a woman’s emotional constitution and its implications for a woman’s marriageability and the success of future relationships helps explain the fact that grooms involved in living-room relationships are strongly encouraged to make a decision after just a few visits.

Communicative intimacy is believed to affect a woman’s marriageability and the success of her future relationships. It must therefore be carefully regulated. A man cannot expect to ‘get to know’ a prospective wife in any deep sense, unless he is willing to make some kind of commitment and place his own marriageability on the line. In Egypt, a prospective spouse is expected to tell their potential life partner about any past engagements and in this way a man who issues a formal proposal is made at least partially accountable for his relational past and this, I would suggest, makes the balance of risk ever so slightly fairer.

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3 The notion that women are, in some contexts, regarded as more passionate than men is also raised by Peletz (1994)
Like Should Marry Like: Criteria for Selecting a Spouse

Much of the anthropological literature on the selection of spouses in Middle Eastern societies has been framed by a preoccupation with the purported prevalence of a preference for FBD marriage in this geographic region (Bourdieu 1977; Keyser 1974; Sholkamy 2003). Whilst such literature has inspired a number of fruitful debates, I believe it has perhaps led to a neglect of the importance attached to the principle that ‘like should marry like’ (takāfu’) both within the Shariah and within everyday life. In this section I will describe how the principle of takāfu’ entered into my informants’ abstract discussions about and concrete assessments of suitable spouses. Time and time again, people would convey to me in varying degrees of explicitness that marriage between ‘like’ units had a higher probability of success, that is marriage between ‘like’ units were more likely to be happy and long-lasting.

My informants tended to describe ‘likeness’ or equivalence in terms of class, occupation, education, religiousness and to a certain extent age. They also demonstrated a very slight degree of variation in terms of the degree of salience they granted each category; with more pious informants paying particular attention to the religiousness of prospective spouses (and his/her family) and more status-conscious informants displaying greater concern for the class, occupation and education of a prospective spouse. My informants often faced difficulty in consciously articulating how to define equivalence in class terms but frequently made reference to wealth, the neighbourhood in which one was raised, occupation, the type of education one received (e.g. if one was privately or publicly educated and if one attended a ‘language school’ or one’s main language of instruction was Arabic) and one’s cosmopolitanism. Informants often spoke about education and occupation in the same breath, a perceived deficiency in educational achievement could sometimes be compensated for by career success. For the most part my informants compared the educational qualifications and occupational success of the bride and groom; yet a few older and more conservative informants suggested that occupation and educational

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4 For more information on the definition of class in Cairo, see de Koning 2009.
equivalence should be assessed by comparing the achievements of the groom with that of the bride’s father. Equivalence in religiousness was also difficult to define, but was often spoken about in terms of fasting and regularity of prayer. Whilst a few years age difference between bride and groom was a prevailing norm, the groom being predominantly older, a few of my female informants argued that excessive discrepancy in age also runs counter to the principle of takāfu’. Ultimately, my informants did not provide a uniform, clear-cut, definition of takāfu’ but instead provided me with the sense that takāfu’ was a vague and multi-faceted concept which sought to ensure likeness between individuals/units with reference to both ‘fixed’ traits such as age, and more mutable characteristics such as religiousness.

In order to gain a clearer understanding of takāfu’, I will discuss how a few of my informants’ concerns about the homogamy of a given union was either a source of concern or a basis for refusal. Time and time again, people would stress to me the importance of ensuring that two spouses (and sometimes even their families) shared similar levels of religious commitment. If this was not the case, one spouse might place the other’s spiritual welfare in jeopardy. In more concrete terms, a pious man married to a spiritually weak woman might find it hard to fast if he suspected his wife is eating in the next room. He might find it hard to summon the discipline to get out of bed and pray if his wife remained sleeping and might struggle to go on pilgrimage if his wife did not support his efforts to save for travel. Spouses should support and strengthen one another in their faith and where two partners hold different levels of religious commitment, there lies a danger that one partner will find their commitment wanes.

Safaa told me how she met her fiancé Youssef through a mutual friend whilst on holiday in the North Coast, an area which is close to Alexandria, contains a number of holiday resorts and is often frequented by upper class Egyptians during the hot summer months. This mutual friend had attended school with Youssef but had not seen him for a few years. Youssef mentioned that he remained firm friends with a few of their former classmates and they too were on holiday in the North Coast. So, they arranged to meet for coffee that evening. Safaa and a few of her other friends came along. Safaa and Youssef instantly clicked and they and their respective
shillas’ (friendship groups) hung out together at coffee shops and fast food outlets most evenings. Upon returning to Cairo, the two friendship groups continued to meet up. Safaa and Youssef never spent time alone together. Doing so might have compromised Safaa’s reputation. However in the presence of their friends, they forged a close friendship and gradually fell in love. Eventually Youssef proposed. Both sets of parents were satisfied with their children’s choice and began to prepare for the forthcoming marriage. A few months after the proposal, Safaa’s family hosted an engagement party. Both partners’ extended families and close friends were invited. Whilst there, Youssef’s parents, amongst others, met Safaa’s grandmother. Safaa’s grandmother was in her late 60s and Christian. This was a source of considerable concern for Youssef’s parents. If Safaa’s family were as religious as they claimed to be, how could a woman spend more than forty years of her life in their presence and not feel inspired to convert? Other relatives voiced similar concerns and thus Youssef’s parents began to question Safaa’s religiousness and her suitability as a spouse. They expressed these concerns to Youssef and stated that they were worried that his proposed marriage to Safaa might place his spiritual welfare in jeopardy. Youssef listened patiently to their concerns but urged them to take more time actually to get to know Safaa. Sure enough, with time his parents came to realise that Safaa was a good Muslim and that Youssef was deeply attached to her. So, they opted to put their reservations about her grandmother to one side, and set about supporting the couple in their future lives together.

People would also stress to me the importance of ensuring that spouses were of similar class. The belief was that a marriage between persons of different class would require considerable adjustment by both parties and may therefore put a strain upon the relationship. Moreover, many stated that such marriages can be problematic as they are perceived to bear the risk that one party will either exalt or patronise the other (see also Sherif 1999). Indeed, one of my informants spoke of her refusal of a prospective groom in these terms. I first met Nermine through my language exchange partner. One afternoon whilst waiting for the latter to arrive, Nermine and I got chatting. She asked how my fieldwork was going and I told her a little about my

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5 In Islam, a Muslim man can marry a Christian, Jewish or Muslim woman.
visits to various jewellers. I then asked if she had ever been engaged and she began
to describe three proposals which came to nothing. Each are interesting in their own
right, but in this section I would like to restrict myself to discussing a proposal made
by one of Nermine’s classmates.

At the time I met her, Nermine had already gained an Italian degree from Cairo
University and was working towards a Masters in translation. She was outspoken,
intelligent and very entertaining. She told me how, during her undergraduate studies,
one of her classmates began to take an interest in her. They would frequently
collaborate on assignments and in her last year he proposed. Despite being very fond
of him, she felt compelled to refuse him. When I asked why, she told me she wanted
to preserve her dignity, explaining that she had a more humble background than her
suitor. If she tried to pursue the relationship, tradition dictates that her suitor and his
family would have to visit her natal home to make a formal proposal. She firmly
believed that, after visiting her family home and seeing the difference in class
between them, he would reject her. She did not want to put herself through this kind
of trauma and humiliation. Thus, she steadfastly refused his repeated proposals until
eventually they graduated and lost contact. She was still a little sad that things had
worked out this way but firmly believed that this relationship was never very viable.

Uneasiness about relationships which cut across class boundaries also features in
another informant’s account of a rather troubled relationship. Dalia came from the
middle class neighbourhood of Haram. As a young student she used to work part-
time as a hotel receptionist. When she was just nineteen, one of the hotel’s regular
customers began to take a particular interest in her. He would always take time to
chat with and to a certain extent, flirt with her. She was flattered, if not a little
embarrassed, by his interest. He would persistently ask her out for dinner and she
would repeatedly refuse. Eventually, in a rather exasperated tone he asked, how
could he ever persuade her to have supper with him. She coyly replied that he would
have to speak to her father. Much to her surprise, he took this reply seriously and
asked for her home address and phone number. The very next day, he contacted her
parents and arranged to visit them. He introduced himself to them and spoke about
his education and career, his future plans and the kind of lifestyle he would provide.
Her mother was visibly agitated. He then asked if the couple could spend a little time getting to know one another before making a formal proposal. Dalia’s mother angrily retorted that her daughter was not a prostitute. Dalia’s suitor ignored the strength of her mother’s outburst, stating he understood her mother’s desire to protect her daughter and would therefore be willing for the couple to become formally engaged straight away.

Dalia’s mother still held strong reservations. Dalia was nineteen, her suitor was thirty one. Dalia was middle class, her suitor was upper class and incredibly wealthy. Dalia’s mother was therefore keen to vet this man, to check he was who he said he was. Yet this presented a series of problems. Her suitor lived in the upper class neighbourhood of Zamalek and she would feel embarrassed approaching neighbours, grocers etc to ask about Dalia’s suitor’s reputation. He also directed his own company, so did not have a boss or colleagues she could usefully consult. Their discrepancy in class meant that they were also unlikely to share any mutual friends or acquaintances who would be able to tell her about this suitor. So, she resorted to asking if he could provide his ID and bank account details. Dalia commented that her suitor felt this request was incredibly aggressive, but that she sympathised with her mother. She explained that his blatant contravention of social convention (the fact he had proposed to someone outside his social class) sparked suspicion and that her mother had few other means of vetting him. Dalia’s mother went to the police station to check his criminal record, to the civil registry to check his marital status and to his bank manager to check his financial circumstances. Everything matched what he had said and Dalia had grown very excited about this new relationship and so her mother provisionally supported the new union. The couple did legally marry, but their relationship was terminated shortly before the wedding. Dalia’s willingness to risk defying social norms by marrying hypergamously did not, in the end, pay off but more importantly her mother’s reaction to this initial proposal vividly illustrates the anxiety that matches which transgress class boundaries can produce.

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6 The issue of vetting is discussed in greater depth later on in this chapter.
7 Mixing between classes is somewhat unusual in Cairene society. This was perhaps best illustrated by informants’ comments about ma’a’dat ar-rafta’ā (tables at which travelers or poor people could sit and break the fast during Ramadan). They remarked that these were rare venues in which persons of different class sat and ate together.
Despite having spoken to a number of people at considerable length about the selection of spouses, nobody ever mentioned that the principle of *takāfu* was enshrined in Islamic law. The belief that ‘like should marry like’ had become a mainstream feature of conventional wisdom about kinship. I was repeatedly told that excessive adjustment to one’s spouse’s differences could compromise the wellbeing of the individual and place a strain on the marital relationship, which could ultimately place its durability in serious jeopardy. It seems that my informants found such practical reasoning adequately explained their commitment to the principle that ‘like should marry like’ and were either unaware of, or did not see, the need to mention its importance in Islamic law.

Yet the historical and legal literature provide us with some fascinating cases in which marriages were annulled on the grounds that they were not homogamous in nature (Baron 1993; El-Alami 1992). For example El-Alami describes a case concerning a marriage between a female university lecturer and peasant farmer. Shortly after their marriage, the lecturer went to court claiming that, back in 1988 when she contracted the union with the farmer, she was in a ‘trance-like’ state. She moved on to state she had subsequently come to her senses and believed their marriage should be annulled due to absence of *takāfu*. Interestingly, the plaintiff did not put forward the fact that she was allegedly ‘entranced’ as a reason for challenging the legitimacy of this union. In 1990, the court ruled that the couple’s marriage contract was not binding as ‘the parties were of different social status and their life together was therefore liable to fail’ (El-Alami 1992:74). It seems that the court shared with many of my informants the belief that successful marriages tend to be underpinned by the principle of *takāfu*.

**The Unknowable Other**

In November 2009, I attended a public discussion hosted by Ghada Abd El Aal, the author of the best-selling novel, *ṭaayza atagawaz* (I want to marry). She stated that she was seeking inspiration for her next book and for a Ramadan soap series and urged the audience to speak frankly about their own views about and experiences
concerning marriage. Rather predictably, members of the audience began to speak about the ‘marriage crisis’. They claimed that unemployment, housing shortages, high rates of inflation and low wages meant many young men were unable to meet the various costs associated with getting married in a ‘suitable’ manner. Yet half-way through this discussion, an older man stood up and walked over to the microphone. He stated that he had a flat and that he had enough money in the bank for furnishing etc. At which point an older female member of the audience heckled him with a joke, ‘let me introduce you...’ After the laughter had dissipated, he moved on to state that at the age of thirty-seven he still was not married. He then argued that the reason he was not married and that many other men take such a long time to commit is that they have difficulty in trusting others. This sparked a huge discussion. Many stated that they felt afraid and suspicious of one another. They also commented that they were scared of prospective spouses concealing their ‘true nature’. Later in the discussion people began to proffer advice on how to verify the suitability of a prospective spouse.

In this section, I explore the widespread concern that one can never really know a prospective spouse. I discuss my informants’ views about and deployment of ‘vetting procedures’, paying particular attention to attempts to gather information about a prospective spouse from third party sources, and the attempt to gain greater knowledge of the other and predict their likely future conduct during engagement or courtship encounters. I also describe the experiences of one informant, who felt that she had been wilfully deceived by a prospective spouse.

My informants’ methods for gathering information about prospective spouses from third party sources were multiple and diverse. Some informants would ask a trusted relative to go to a prospective spouse’s neighbourhood and ask locals about the person in question. The timing of these investigations varied. Some mentioned conducting these investigations before visiting the prospective bride’s home. Others would wait until shortly before issuing a formal proposal. Brides’ families might undertake such enquiries before a formal meeting or after a tentative proposal has been made. The appointed relative would often speak to local vendors, neighbours and where possible the doorman. Their questions were generally relatively open, but
some mentioned that when, for example, speaking to the local grocer one might ask whether the family of a prospective groom pays their bills on time and when speaking to a doorman one might ask whether a girl ever stays out late at night. Many commented that this kind of investigation rarely revealed a great deal but it was considered foolhardy to not carry through any kind of vetting. After all, as one young fiancée stated, what’s one wasted afternoon compared to a troubled marriage? With time, I began to sense that vetting was also seen as a kinship duty and a way of confirming or expressing care.

My informants often attempted to justify their conviction that such investigations were rarely particularly informative in two key ways. First of all, some would state that neighbourhood communities were not the same as they once were and people only really have a very superficial knowledge of their neighbours. Thus a neighbour might gain a superficial judgement of a girl’s respectability from the way she dresses, the way she walks, whom she walks with and the time she gets home but that neighbour will not know in any deep sense the content of her character or the nature of her relationships. For the unacquainted reader, some of this might require a little more explanation. Walking swiftly and purposefully is seen as respectable. Dawdling along the street, however, is often seen as provocative and is likely to attract attention. And whilst some Egyptians adopt a rather liberal approach to gender mixing, others would question the respectability of a woman who is regularly seen walking with an unrelated male.

To return to my main point, whereas some believed that the informativeness of such neighbourhood investigations was compromised by a lack of knowledge on the part of the person questioned, others believed that the value of such investigations was undermined by their lack of frankness. They argued that locals often realised why such questions were being asked and would be hesitant to say anything unflattering. Indeed responding to such enquiries with negative comments was seen as particularly unkind and was likely to backfire if the person/family in question found out. Many stated that a person would only respond to such enquiries with negative comments if they had serious misgivings towards or concerns about the person/family in question. Why, after all, would one risk alienating a neighbour or acquaintance for the sake of
a stranger? Consequently neutral or positive comments were generally taken with a pinch of salt. One, 24 year-old fiancée recalled to me her family’s fear that a member of her fiancé’s family would speak to a specific set of neighbours. This particular neighbour had proposed to her and she had refused him. Her father had tried to be as diplomatic as possible, simply stating that the proposed union was not God’s will, but his family had taken offense and, she believed, continued to harbour ill-feeling towards them. And so, her family were concerned that if these neighbours were ever consulted they would sabotage her chances at forging a future with an appropriate suitor.8 Fortunately, no such encounter occurred, but she stressed that at that time it was a very real and feared possibility. Ultimately, information gleaned from a prospective spouse’s neighbourhood was treated with a certain degree of scepticism.

Speaking with an individual’s colleagues and employers was seen by some as a slightly more reliable means of gaining third party insight into a prospective spouse’s character and circumstances. My informants argued that over time colleagues and, to a certain extent, employers gain quite considerable insight into one another’s circumstances, habits and temperament. One gets a sense of how someone responds to and deals with pressures and setbacks. It is this kind of privileged knowledge about the prospective spouse that persons undertaking such investigations will want to find out. Often one can access such information by finding out if anyone in one’s extended social network knows of someone at a given company or institution but it is not unusual for a bride’s father to arrange an appointment with a prospective son-in-law’s boss. The bride’s father hopes to find out more about his daughter’s prospective husband but once again many mentioned that a sense of loyalty to one’s colleague or employee could preclude full and frank disclosure.

Another, perhaps more subtle, way of gathering information about a prospective spouse and/or his or her family through third party sources was to mobilise one’s own social networks and personal relationships. Family members, most often mothers wielding telephones, would consider if any of their friends or colleagues were in a position to tell them more about a prospective spouse and his or her family.

8 None of my other informants expressed similar concerns but one wonders if fear of a neighbour’s ability to adversely affect one’s marriage prospects serves to police community conduct.
Soon enough one would learn things about a prospective spouse that had hitherto remained undisclosed. Yet the effectiveness of this technique hinged upon the existence of some overlap between the bride and groom’s social circles. As mentioned earlier, where such overlap is deemed unlikely to exist, the application of this technique is considered futile.

Whilst the strategies my informants employed to gain information about prospective spouses through third party sources were endlessly fascinating, it is also interesting to consider what such vetting tells us about their perceptions of human relationships. When I asked my informants why they deemed such measures necessary, they stated they wanted to gain a fuller picture of who their potential husband or wife was. They recognised that our knowledge of others is only ever partial and is generally conditioned and constrained by the context of our interaction and the impact we ourselves have upon the way that person presents themselves. Vetting, then, was an attempt to overcome these rather unsettling constraints upon one’s ability to know the other. They sought to determine how their prospective spouse behaves in a variety of relationships. They also sought to determine if any information pertinent to their marital future had been deliberately withheld, purposefully distorted or unwittingly left undisclosed. Ultimately, they sought to gain a fuller and less partial i.e. a less biased and less incomplete knowledge, of their prospective life-partner. They reasoned that such information might help one guess but would never definitively foretell the future of a given relationship. Interestingly, such attempts were themselves constrained by the relationship between the third party, the seeker of information and the person in question. Questions of loyalty play a huge role in influencing the kind of information that is disclosed during such vetting processes.

My informants believed that information derived from third party sources should be supplemented by knowledge gained from time spent together during the engagement. Many characterised the engagement as a phase of discovery in which one gained greater insight into the suitability of a prospective spouse. For this reason, some were particularly wary of quick marriages with short engagement periods. These kinds of

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9 This is reminiscent of Georg Simmel’s article The Sociology of Secrecy and of Secret Societies in which he states our knowledge of the other ‘necessarily depends upon that portion of the other which our standpoint towards him permits us to see’ (Simmel 1906: 442).
marriage are fairly atypical in Egypt but do occur between Egyptian women at home and Egyptian men working abroad. In such circumstances, the engagement period is often truncated by the fact that the suitor must return abroad to continue with his job. This limits a woman’s ability to acquire a first-hand impression of the suitability of her prospective husband and relationships of this kind are considered to be rather risky.

Interestingly, the sense that the engagement period might be regarded as a period of discovery was not only voiced by persons who described their relationship as a living room marriage. Indeed, despite forging a close friendship with her fiancé prior to engagement and describing her relationship as a love marriage, Safaa, remarked that engagement had allowed her to forge a new kind of acquaintanceship with her fiancé. This provided her with a greater understanding of her fiancé’s nature and circumstances. Engagement allowed Safaa to witness her fiancé, Youssef, within the domestic context and to actually see how he treated his mother. She was impressed to find that he treated her with warmth and respect. In common with many other female informants, Safaa believed that the relationship between a suitor and his mother could provide an indicator of how one is likely to be treated in marriage. Having observed Youssef’s interactions with his mother, Safaa felt rather positive about her forthcoming marriage. Engagement also provided her with the opportunity to get to know Youssef’s family and to see how he would support her in the event of conflict with his family. She was impressed with the way he handled his parents’ concerns about her grandmother and believed that his ability to handle his parents boded well for the future of their relationship. Ultimately Safaa maintained that her engagement granted her greater access to information about Youssef and therefore enhanced her ability to assess his suitability as a spouse.

This sense that engagement encounters provide one with valuable information about the suitability of a prospective spouse pervaded many of my informants’ accounts of, and discussions about, relationships. This was perhaps most vividly illustrated by

10 It must be noted that a few informants believed that the relationship between a suitor’s father and mother provided an indicator of how one was likely to be treated in marriage.
11 Prior to engagement spending time with Youssef in his family home would have been seen as improper.
many female informants’ attempts to determine the ‘greater significance’ of a suitor’s actions. For example, a failure to tip was often seen as an indicator of cold-heartedness. These young women’s appetite for inference appeared to be fuelled by a belief that present and past behaviour could predict future conduct and an anxious fear that a failure to read a suitor correctly could ultimately culminate in either an unhappy marriage or a marriage of limited duration. This interpretative process was further complicated by the possibility of deception and the recognition that the engagement often had a peculiar effect upon people’s actions. To explicate further, it was recognised that sexual tension and the many practical challenges associated with preparing for marriage could alter people’s behaviour. These kinds of pressure were deemed extraordinary and thus if challenging attitudes or behaviour surfaced during the engagement period, one had to judge if such attitudes or behaviour would arise again after the couple married or if this was symptomatic of the peculiar stresses and strains associated with the process of getting married. This judgement was laden with risk.

Even where a prospective spouse conformed to one’s ideals, one still faced the rather unsettling possibility that one was somehow being deceived. And so, I found many of my informants expended much energy in scrutinising their prospective spouse’s conduct and appeared to be hyper-aware of any form of discrepancy in their overall ‘presentation of self’ (Goffman 1969). Erving Goffman has drawn a distinction between the impressions a person ‘gives’ and those which they ‘give off’ (Goffman 1969: 14). According to Goffman’s schema, impressions given are predominantly verbal and are generally considered to be more amenable to conscious manipulation than impressions given ‘off’. He further suggests that impressions given ‘off’ are generally non-verbal, tend to be considered to be unintentional and are seen as somehow more authentic than their verbal counterparts. The pertinence of this distinction to the process of assessing the suitability of a prospective spouse is perhaps most clearly captured by one informant’s, Nermine’s, dealings with a suitor whom she believed had exaggerated the extent of his religiousness.

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12 Not least, the challenge of finding and furnishing a home in a manner which satisfies both parties. This will be discussed further in chapter four.
Nermine, along with many other female informants, mentioned her desire to marry a religious man. They believed that if conjugal affection ever waned, a religious man was more likely to treat them well. If decent conduct underpinned by emotional attachment could not be guaranteed, good conduct motivated by a fear of God could. Interestingly, similar arguments were often repeated by ma’dhūnīn (registrars) in the course of contract-writing ceremonies. Nermine first met this particular suitor, Nasser, at a friend’s wedding. Nasser subsequently spoke to one of her friends’ expressing an interest in Nermine and asked if she could arrange for them to meet. So Nasser and Nermine met within the ‘respectable’ setting of a cultural centre amongst friends. During this meeting Nasser spoke a great deal and expressed his various moral and religious convictions. Reassured by what he had to say, Nermine agreed to meet him a week later with another couple in some public gardens. They chatted as a group and at some point the call to prayer sounded. At this point a particularly religious man would cease conversation and remain still for a while. Yet he continued talking. There appeared to be a discrepancy between the impression he had given (his many statements about his moral and religious convictions) and that he had given “off” (his failure to fall silent during the call to prayer). This made Nermine suspicious and so after the call to prayer she began to interrogate him. She asked him why he hadn’t stopped talking, and he claimed he hadn’t heard it. Yet in her opinion this ‘obviously wasn’t true’, he had feigned religiousness and given her a false sense of security. She felt angry and betrayed and so quickly made an excuse and left.

**Conclusion**

In a fascinating essay on human action, Hannah Arendt writes ‘he who acts never quite knows what he is doing, that he always becomes “guilty” of consequences he never intended or even foresaw, that no matter how disastrous and unexpected the consequences of his deed he can never undo it, that the process he starts is never consummated unequivocally in one single deed or event’ (Arendt 1958: 233). And while I broadly agree with this argument, I would suggest that Arendt provides a rather undifferentiated vision of human action. While ‘the burden of unpredictability
and irreversibility’ (Arendt 1958: 233) might well be an intrinsic feature of all human action, this ‘burden’ is often perceived to weigh more heavily in some contexts than in others. The anxiety generated by an awareness of such burden seems to be particularly acute for Cairene Muslims in the process of selecting a spouse and this, I suggest, might be linked to two key phenomena. First, a concern with modesty and propriety restricts the kinds of knowledge that one can gather about a prospective partner and this is seen to exacerbate the unpredictability of the long-term consequences of a given choice in spouse. Secondly, decisions about whom to and whom not to marry are, within this context, considered to carry ‘high-consequence risks’ (Giddens 1991:112) and this can make the aforementioned burdens of action all the more difficult to bear. Indeed, such decisions can result in the creation of an unfavourable union and this can have a significant bearing upon one’s future happiness. And even if one successfully escapes that union through divorce, one can never completely eliminate its capacity to influence one’s future. One still has to deal with the material, interpersonal and/or other consequences of one’s initial decision. It is therefore perhaps little surprise that the process of selecting a spouse is so often coloured by anxiety and uncertainty.

Arendt’s essay on human action also serves to complicate the way we view the agency of the actor. Indeed, she argues an actor who is unable to predict the long-term consequences of his actions and is at the same time unable to undo that action of his own accord may, at times, appear ‘much more the victim and sufferer than the author and doer of what he has done’ (Arendt 1958: 233). This sense that agency might possess a double edge is repeated by Alfred Gell; ‘From every act made by an agent, there ensues an additional restraint upon action, which arises from the blocking-off of one or more branching series of possibility, once open, now foreclosed’ (Gell 1992: 219). 13 This is made all the more explicit in Perveez Mody’s work on love-marriage in India; ‘agency is a double-edged sword: it makes itself known to individuals through their acts of freedom and efficacy, but it also

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13 In a recent article on reunions between Scottish adoptees and their birth parents, Carsten (2000b) illustrates the pertinence of this statement to the ways in which adult adoptees think about their past.
constrains and makes them accountable to groups’ (Mody 2008: 46), something which Mody suggests has been frequently overlooked by anthropologists.

Such reflections upon the ambiguous nature of human agency are of particular pertinence to the process of selecting a spouse in Cairo. In accordance with Mody, I would suggest that an attention to accountability might nuance our analysis of the agency of our informants. And whilst Mody pays particular attention to the ways in which love-marriage couples in India are accountable to the ‘groups to which they are assumed to belong’ (Mody 2008: 191), in this chapter I have paid particular attention to the ways in which those wishing to get married are made accountable to the groups to which they hope to belong i.e. their prospective affines. And I would suggest that the anxiety which surrounds the process of selecting a spouse in Cairo is, at least in part, fuelled by a sense that one’s future self might be judged with particular reference to one’s past deeds within this domain. In spite of the unpredictability of their outcome, one’s actions in the present might come to shape one’s future. In other words, the idea that one’s previous actions can block-off ‘one or more branching series of possibility, once open, now foreclosed’ (Gell 1992: 219) is profoundly relevant in a society in which one’s relational past can seriously affect one’s perceived eligibility in the present, and this I would suggest, only adds to the pressure upon prospective spouses to make judicious choices. Indeed it seems that those in the process of selecting a spouse are only too aware of the fact that they might one day become ‘the victim and the sufferer’ (Arendt 1958: 233) of the decisions they have made and this is a source of acute anxiety and considerable concern.
2 Managing Marital Uncertainty: Between Human Judgement and Divine Guidance

In the previous chapter, I argued that the process of selecting a spouse was pervaded by anxiety and uncertainty. It was plagued by the ever-present possibility that one was in fact making an unwise choice. Whilst basic cultural principles and practices such as the vetting of prospective brides and grooms might provide some degree of reassurance, many of my informants still lacked confidence in their ability to make such potentially life-changing decisions. They thus sought guidance from an omniscient God through the performance of a ritual called ṣalāt al-istikhāra.

In this chapter, I will analyse my informants’ accounts of this quest for guidance in relation to marriage. I advance four key arguments. Firstly, I argue that the exercise of human judgement and the search for divine guidance are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, one should only perform istikhāra after one has exercised one’s own rational judgement and found oneself in need of God’s guidance. Secondly, I assert that the timing of the performance of ṣalāt al-istikhāra is of analytic significance; it points towards periods of confusion, uncertainty and doubt. The fact that some people continue to undertake istikhāra after a proposal has been made and accepted demonstrates the fragile and terminable nature of the engagement and highlights the processual and open-ended nature of marital decision-making. Thirdly, I highlight that claims regarding the manifestation of God’s guidance are subject to considerable scepticism. Fourthly, I argue that for many of my informants, one’s access to, and understanding of, God’s guidance is contingent upon one’s religiousness, hence His guidance is deemed to be exclusive in nature.

Ultimately, I suggest that ṣalāt al-istikhāra generally is a theoretically significant yet greatly understudied aspect of marriage-making amongst Egyptian Muslims. In fact the topic of divination, of which ṣalāt al-istikhāra is but one example, has, in many ways been neglected by anthropological studies of marriage. Numerous authors have mentioned that divination plays a part in the production of marriage in places
including Sudan (Evans-Pritchard 1937), India (Mody 2008), Malaysia (Carsten 1997); China (Durkheim & Mauss 1963) and Java (Geertz 1989). Yet such authors rarely explore this topic in any great depth. I suspect that there is some scope for anthropologists to undertake detailed and original ethnographic work into the role of divination in the production of marriage and that a cross-cultural comparison of this topic might bear interesting anthropological fruit.

**What is Šalāt al-istikhāra?**

The word ‘istikhara’ means ‘seeking the best’ (Mittermaier 2011:96) and refers to a specific form of Islamic prayer in which ‘guidance is sought when one is unable to decide between two permissible alternatives’ (Mittermaier 2011:96). It can be performed for any kind of decision. Indeed one of my informants, a human resources officer, stated that on numerous occasions she had performed Šalāt al-istikhāra in order to decide which candidate to hire for a given job. However Šalāt al-istikhāra is most commonly associated with marriage (Fisher 1979; Hamdy 2009; Mittermaier 2011). It consists of two ritual cycles (raka‘a) in which an individual ‘executes a fixed sequence of movements (standing, prostrating, kneeling, sitting), each accompanied by a fixed Arabic recitation’ (Bowen 1989: 601) followed by a special prayer ¹ which is translated and cited below:

‘O Allah! I seek goodness from Your Knowledge and with Your Power (and Might) I seek strength, and I ask from You Your Great Blessings, because You have the Power and I do not have the power. You Know everything and I do not know, and You have knowledge of the unseen. Oh Allah! If in Your Knowledge this action ------------------ is better for my religion and faith, for my life and end [death], for here [in this world] and the hereafter then make it destined for me and make it easy for me and then add blessings in it, for me. O Allah! In Your Knowledge

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¹ The worshipper should concentrate upon their request whilst performing this prayer (Padwick 1996)
if this action is bad for me, bad for my religion and faith, for my life and end [death], for here [in this world] and the hereafter then turn it away from me and turn me away from it and whatever is better for me, ordain [destine] that for me and then make me satisfied with it.’

This prayer must also be performed with the correct attitude and intention. It must be directed to God (Mahmood 2001), performed in a spirit of neutrality and with a genuine desire to fulfil God’s will (Mittermaier 2011; Hamdy 2009). God will then hopefully respond by making His will known to the person who performed the prayer. Before describing such responses, I think it is important to reflect upon the ideas contained within this prayer. The prayer advances a vision of God as omniscient and omnipotent. The knowledge and power of the worshipper, by contrast, is portrayed as profoundly limited. It also implies that the worshipper’s destiny can be altered in the present; ‘then make it destined for me’. And finally it invokes God to help the worshipper to reconcile himself with his destiny; ‘make me satisfied with it’.

**Troubled Times: The search for God’s guidance**

Upon first hearing about Ṣalāt al-istikhāra, I rather brashly assumed that this prayer would be performed at two key moments in the marriage-making process. I assumed Ṣalāt al-istikhāra would be performed by a man before deciding to propose to a given woman and by the prospective bride when deciding whether to accept or reject a proposal. Yet, I quickly found the timing of Ṣalāt al-istikhāra was far more complex and arguably more interesting than I originally surmised.

Shortly after Ramadan, I went to the upscale neighbourhood of Mohandiseen to meet up with a friend, whom I shall call Sara, for coffee. We had a lot to catch up on and so I asked about her news. She began to complain about a particularly awkward situation with one of her family friends. A former colleague of her mother’s had

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invited Sara and her mother for supper. They had duly accepted and had a rather enjoyable evening in her family’s company. About a week later, Sara’s mother received a phone call from her colleague stating that her son would like to propose. Her mother said that she would speak to Sara and call back. Sara however was less than keen on this idea, explaining that, in her view, a man should be at least as educated, if not, more so, than his wife. Whilst she held a Bachelors degree, he had dropped out of an engineering course and failed to graduate. She stated that she might have been able to accept this had he been particularly successful, but he had a rather mediocre office job. She, on the other hand, had a well-paid job as a software engineer. She therefore felt they were something of a mismatch and asked her mother to turn down his proposal in as tactful a way as possible. Her mother’s attempts to deliver this news sensitively and her friend’s response took up much of the remainder of the conversation.

Yet more pertinent to my discussion here is that, in the course of our conversation, I asked Sara if she had made ṣalāt al-istikhāra at any point in the decision-making process. She replied that in this instance, she felt that performing ṣalāt al-istikhāra was unnecessary. I was somewhat surprised by this response. I already knew that Sara regularly woke up early to perform ṣalāt al-fajr (the prayer of sunrise) and I thought that if anyone would seek God’s guidance on such a matter it would be Sara. And so, I persevered and asked why she had opted against praying istikhāra. She explained that one should only perform istikhāra after one has exercised one’s own rational judgement and found oneself in need of God’s guidance (see Mittermaier 2011). She had considered this suitor’s proposal, had made a decision which she felt happy and confident with and thus deemed istikhāra unnecessary. Ultimately, in Sara’s view, ṣalāt al-istikhāra is something one only performs when human judgement falls short.

Sara’s basic argument, that ṣalāt al-istikhāra is generally performed when the exercise of human reason alone is deemed insufficient, was repeatedly highlighted, albeit in less explicit terms, in my informants’ accounts of their relationships. For example, one informant, Hossam, revealed that he had performed ṣalāt al-istikhāra with reference to his most recent relationship shortly before proposing and once
again, when he and his ex-fiancée began to fight about the costs of marriage. He explained that, back in 2009 he was living and working in Dubai with his family. He was also involved in a long-distance relationship with an Egyptian friend of his sister-in-law’s. Everything was going smoothly. They were engaged and preparing for their life as a married couple. Then in December the financial crisis hit. His father and his brother lost their jobs and Hossam and his sister-in-law suddenly found they had to take on dual responsibility for the family’s outgoings. This drastic shift in financial circumstances was inevitably going to affect his marital preparations. He thus explained the situation to his fiancée and suggested they either economise or postpone the wedding until ‘things had returned to normal’. His fiancée was less than sympathetic.

At this point, Hossam began to have doubts about their relationship. He was no longer sure about the genuineness of his fiancée’s feelings for him or indeed her ability or willingness to support him during testing times. He began to wonder if he should continue with the relationship. On the one hand, he felt that he had made a commitment and was duty-bound to carry through with it. Yet, on the other hand, he felt that he was propelling himself towards an unsustainable and possibly quite unhappy relationship. He spent days in complete turmoil, agonising about this decision yet remained utterly confused. And so he turned to God for guidance. He performed the *istikhāra* prayer. Four months later the couple had broken up. Hossam had turned to God at a time of crisis and now felt content with the outcome of this course of events.

A number of other informants described how they, or indeed their mothers, had performed *Ṣalāt al-istikhāra* at times of particular relational crisis.\(^3\) For example, one informant performed this prayer after her fiancé’s Facebook profile led her to doubt his fidelity; another informant performed this prayer after an argument with her fiancé about the location of their marital home, and another informant’s mother made *istikhāra* after a particularly disastrous engagement party. But, these are all rather extreme examples; other informants still spoke of performing *Ṣalāt al-istikhāra* when they were not completely confident in, or certain about, their decisions. Whilst the

\(^3\) The issue of parallel prayers will be discussed later in this chapter.
specific content of my informants’ stories differ quite radically, a few things are shared in common. The timing of ṣalāt al-istikhāra was not entirely predictable and did not necessarily occur at fixed points in a relational trajectory. It was instead determined by an individual’s circumstances. People tended to perform this prayer at times of uncertainty. They believed that certain decisions (for example whether to break up an engagement) would have a significant impact upon their or their loved one’s future happiness and thus sought reassurance that they were following the correct path. The very people performing ṣalāt al-istikhāra had through various means, such as vetting, sought to determine a given person’s suitability as a future life partner, yet still found themselves grappling with uncertainty. The exercise of human judgement alone was deemed inadequate and thus they sought guidance from an omniscient God; they performed ṣalāt al-istikhāra.

An Interventionist God: Reflections upon Responses

Having executed istikhāra prayer, the performer anxiously waits for God’s guidance. Yet how does this guidance present itself? My informants provided a range of responses to this question. For some, guidance came in the form of a dream. For others, it came in the form of feelings. For others still, God’s guidance was made manifest in his action in the world. That is God would erect obstacles along the path He hoped an individual would avoid and make the path that He willed easy to follow (see also Mittermaier 2011). Many suggested, God’s guidance could be made manifest in some combination of each of these forms. For one fiancé, God’s guidance came as a dream, a sense of calmness, and as an event in waking life that he argued was freighted with supernatural significance. His experience, and that of a single woman who believed God had erected obstacles which prevented the completion of her relationship, are detailed below.

Ahmed had been acting as Eman’s boss for a few years and over that time they had built up a friendly and respectful working relationship. He was growing older, had

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4 For one of my informants, this guidance never came. His experiences will be discussed later in this chapter.
successfully saved up a substantial sum of cash and his mind was turned towards marriage. He believed Eman could make a suitable wife, had already discussed the issue with his parents and was trying to decide whether to propose. He felt fairly confident in his choice but still felt a slight sense of uncertainty and so he performed the istikhāra prayer. That night he had a dream in which a white pigeon swooped down towards his house. He woke up the next morning feeling incredibly calm and ‘just knew’ that he was making the right decision. He consequently spoke to Eman at work and asked if it would be possible to meet her father. Eman and her family accepted his proposal and the couple began to prepare for marriage.

Returning to Edinburgh, I idly flicked through Ibn Seerin’s dictionary of dreams. It stated that for an unwed person ‘seeing a pigeon inside the house symbolised marriage’ (Al-Akili 1992:329). Ahmed’s pigeon was not quite inside his house but it’s rather interesting to note that his dream corresponded closely to Islamic tradition. I never got the opportunity to ask Ahmed if he’d heard of Ibn Serin or if anyone he knew had had a similar experience but I am most certainly interested in hearing what his response would be. For Ahmed and Eman, the process of actually preparing for marriage was not without its difficulties. Particular problems arose when the couple attempted to decide where to locate their home. Ahmed was from Imbaba and Eman was from Moneib, a neighbourhood in the outskirts of Giza. Ahmed hoped to live in Imbaba as he wanted to be close to his job downtown. However Eman was keen to live in Moneib. She believed living in Moneib would make it easier for her mother to support her when she began to rear children. She also feared that life in a different neighbourhood might become a little lonely. The couple had argued over this matter on a number of occasions and neither seemed particularly willing to compromise. During one particularly heated exchange, when both felt that their relationship was in jeopardy, they turned around to see a white pigeon swoop down onto the street. It must be noted here that despite the abundance of pigeon lofts in working class (sha‘bī) neighbourhoods, pigeons are rarely seen on Cairo’s streets. 5 Hence, Ahmed took this as a sign that they should resolve their differences and continue with the

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5 Pigeon stuffed with rice is something of a delicacy in Egypt and thus these creatures are actively reared in certain neighbourhoods.
relationship. So he finally conceded and declared his willingness to live in Moneib. The couple were due to marry in February 2011.

Ahmed’s experiences provide us with a particularly vivid example of the ways in which God’s guidance can be construed to present itself as a dream, a feeling, and an event in waking life. But what of the notion that God’s guidance can be revealed by the relative ease or difficulty associated with pursuing a particular course of action? I now turn to the experiences of a twenty-four year old Egyptian female whom I shall call Sabah. Sabah had been through a broken engagement and upon hearing about my research project boldly declared that she had previously been engaged but that ‘God separated us’. Sabah had met her ex-fiancé at the Susanne Mubarak Public Library in Doqqi when she was just thirteen years old. She visited the library every day to read and study and so the couple gradually became acquainted. Whilst the couple never really dated and had never spent time with one another outside the confines of the library, they did have a special kind of friendship and had grown deeply attached to one another. At the age of twenty-one, Sabah graduated and this friend swiftly proposed.

Even prior to her engagement, friends of Sabah had witnessed this blossoming relationship and had repeatedly urged her to make ṣalāt al-istikhāra. Yet, for a long time she had resisted following their advice. In retrospect, she believes this resistance stemmed from the fact that, despite feeling an intense love for him, a part of her knew that ultimately he was not a suitable partner. She believed that, whilst she did not realise it at the time, she subconsciously feared that if she performed this prayer she would be forced to abandon the relationship. She was not ready for this. Over time, she had on repeated occasions noticed a discrepancy between what her ex-fiancé said and what he actually did. Most of the time such ‘lies’ were relatively minor. For example, he would say he had returned a book when in fact he’d forgotten. Yet, on one occasion she found out he’d lied about something quite significant. He had promised her that he would not mix business and friendship but a few months later he helped a friend get a job at his company. They subsequently bumped into this friend and initially her fiancé denied that they were colleagues but eventually confessed that he had helped get him hired. She was less than impressed
and was beginning to grow more and more uncertain about her choice in life-partner. Things reached something of a climax when she saw his Facebook page. A number of unknown girls were included in his profile, but more than that, some of their messages led her to question his fidelity. She was deeply attached to him but she was becoming increasingly anxious about their forthcoming marriage and uncertain about his suitability as a life-partner.

Eventually Sabah’s doubt and confusion became too great to bear. She prayed *istikhāra*. Shortly thereafter, her fiancé lost his job and found himself unable to fulfil the promises he had made to provide various items such as furnishing. So he met up with her, explaining his situation and stating he did not think he would be able to continue with the relationship. I asked Sabah how she had responded to this news. She stated she received this news quite calmly and in fact felt a huge sense of relief. Explaining that, in her view, his redundancy was in fact willed by God. God had obstructed their marriage and thus made his intention known. She could rest assured that she was following the right path and no longer had to grapple with the niggling concern that she was about to marry the wrong man. She further argued that her experiences were consistent with God’s greater scheme. She explained that God intended for people of similar levels of piety to marry and that whilst she had, over the years, grown increasingly religious, her fiancé had remained the same. This discrepancy in piety, she argued, perhaps explained why God had pulled them apart.

Thus far, I have outlined and illustrated the many ways that various informants suggested that God’s guidance could present itself. Yet, in the course of fieldwork, the notion that God’s guidance could manifest itself in the form of feelings, dreams, the removal or erection of obstacles and other signs was far from unquestioned. Sceptics spoke of superstition, chance and the unconscious. In the remainder of this section, I highlight some of the assumptions, tensions and controversies which surround the discussion of responses to the *istikhāra* prayer.

The first debate which surrounds *istikhāra* prayer is controversy over the source of dreams. Dreams as a source of divine communication have a long history in Islam.

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6 I would suggest that this argument is fundamentally linked to the broader cultural and religious principle that ‘like should marry like’.
(Edgar 2011; Fisher 1979; Kilborne 1987; Mittermaier 2011). In fact, ‘Mohammed’s revelations began in the form of a dream’ (Mittermaier 2011:6). It is this sense that dreams can be derived from a divine source that grants dreams both their authority and their potency. Yet, at the same time Freudian psychoanalysis has, since the 1950s, been a feature of Egyptian popular discourse (Mittermaier 2011). Whilst followers of Freud might argue dreams emanate from within\(^7\) and hold a key to understanding our past (Freud 1976), a few of my informants asserted their dreams were from God and in fact foretold the future.

These two contrasting perspectives on the nature of dreams animated a conversation I had about *istikhāra* prayer with a newly-engaged man. He stated that he was cautious about trusting guidance that came in the form of a dream, asking how can one be certain that a given dream was a message from God and not simply an expression of the subconscious. Interestingly, he did not discount the idea that our dreams come from God, but simply suggested that there was more than one type of dream and that it would be risky to act on a dream unless one was able to determine its source.

This view is consistent with many academic descriptions of Islamic perceptions of dreams. Indeed many authors argue that Islam distinguishes between three basic kinds of dream; *halm*, *hadith al nafsi* and *ru’ya*. *Hadith al nafsi* are seen to emanate from the dreamer’s worldly experiences. *Ru’ya*, by contrast, are seen to be sent from God and are held with much reverence. But perhaps most intriguingly, *halm* are seen to be transmitted by the devil (Edgar 2011; Kilborne 1987; Fisher 1979; Mittermaier 2011).

Dreams have been a source of considerable debate within anthropology. Levy-Bruhl argued that the reason why dreams play such a prominent role in the lives of some peoples is not because such people are unable to distinguish between dream and reality, as evolutionists such as Tylor had suggested, but that they value their dreams differently (Levy-Bruhl 1966). In some cultures, dream data is ‘equal to, perhaps even more valuable than the perceptions of the preceding day’ (Levy-Bruhl

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\(^7\) External stimuli such as the sound of an alarm clock might enter into our dream world, but the way in which they are assimilated into the dream is ultimately shaped by the subconscious (Freud 1976)
1966:99). My informants were certainly capable of distinguishing between dream and reality but thought about dreams in a way that was fundamentally different to my own perception of dreams. They believed that some dreams were sent by an omniscient God. Some dreams could foretell the future and were thus greatly valued, especially in the uncertain context of marriage. My informants also believed that certain kinds of dream convey to the dreamer the path that God wills (see Crapanzo 1975). In this way, dreams could compensate for the fallibility of human knowledge and help demystify God’s will. However, only certain kinds of dream could fulfil this function, and thus the dreamer faces the theoretical possibility that their actions are determined by an interpretation of a dream that they mistakenly believe emanated from a divine source.

When Ahmed disclosed his dream to me, I asked him how he knew it was sent from God. He stated with much conviction that he ‘just knew’ that this was no ordinary dream; that it came from God. And here we hit the problem of investigating topics such as dreams; some phenomena cannot be fully translated into words, they have to be experienced in order to be fully known (Tedlock 1987). A similar problem arose when informants stated that, after praying istikhāra, God guided them through their feelings to the choice that He willed. Once again, they struggled to find the words to explain this unshakeable belief.

Much to my surprise, none of my informants were particularly preoccupied with gaining a detailed understanding of their dream and its broader meaning. None mentioned consulting dream dictionaries, visiting dream interpreters or even asking friends or family about the meaning of a given dream. They instead offered rather intuitive interpretations of their dreams, which focused principally upon how the dream should inform their forthcoming actions rather than consider the meaning and symbolism of specific features of the dream.

Another informant argued that using Ṣalāt al-istikhāra to inform one’s marital decisions was problematic as one did not always know whether an obstacle blocking a specific path actually came from God. What happens if one mistakenly assumes that a given challenge comes from God and thus terminates a relationship that he in fact willed? When talking to Sabah about her istikhāra experience, I asked her if she
ever questioned whether her ex-fiancé’s redundancy really was a ‘sign’ from God. She understood my point but was utterly convinced that their relationship was not destined by God. She ‘just knew’ that her fiancé’s redundancy was no mere coincidence.

Several months later I began to think more about what Sabah had told me and began to cringe at the tactlessness of my enquiries. I started to think about the broader social ramifications of Sabah’s story. In Cairo, prospective spouses are expected to tell their future affines about any past engagements. Such disclosures often stimulate further enquiries into, and investigations of, that individual’s relational history. The outcome of this can influence the perceived eligibility of the person in question. In short, one’s relational past affects the way that one is judged in the present. Such judgements are made not only by one’s prospective affines but also by one’s broader network of friends, acquaintances and kin. In this way, it is important to ensure that one’s relational history is viewed in a positive light.

I would argue that Sabah’s attribution of the demise of her relationship to divine intervention ‘God separated us’; serves an important social function. Such interpretations of causality serve to at least partially legitimate less than ideal relational pasts. Indeed, in many respects, the way Sabah portrayed the demise of her relationship cast the nature of her conduct in a rather positive light and reaffirmed her self-identity as a pious Muslim woman. Whilst Sabah had previously resisted performing *istikhāra*, a developing sense of religiosity had led her to perform this prayer at a time of relational indecision. Later on in this chapter, I describe in detail the widespread view that the effectiveness of this prayer is linked to the subjectivity of the worshipper. Yet, for now, I note that a number of my informants claimed that one’s ability to receive, recognise and respond to God’s guidance was contingent upon one’s religiousness. Whilst I did not realise this at the time, Sabah’s story about the way she performed *istikhāra* and received a ‘sign’ that indicated God’s will that she was not only able to recognise but was also able to accept may be seen as an indication of her piety. I would argue that the fact that she incorporated this religious experience into her description of the breakdown of her betrothal is significant. Whilst I did not confirm this point with others, I believe it affects the way
that her character and conduct is conceptualised. And for these reasons, my question about how she knew her fiancé’s redundancy really was a ‘sign’ from God may be perceived as particularly tactless.

One erstwhile fiancé actively mocked the idea that God’s guidance would present itself as a dream or a feeling. He branded such interpretations of istikhāra as ‘bullshit’ and asserted that in his view and indeed his experience God’s response came in the form of His actions in the world. The course of action he preferred would be made easy. Whilst others did not go so far as saying that stories of dreams and feelings were ‘bullshit’, they did suggest that people who believed such things were ‘kind of superstitious’. Such views must be considered within the wider context of debates about and actions surrounding, superstition in Egypt. It must be noted that orientalist literature frequently alludes to the purported irrationality and superstitiousness of ‘Eastern’ peoples and that such assertions were often utilised to help the continuation of western imperialism (Mittermaier 2011). Mittermaier argues such discourse also served, at least, partially to inspire both Egyptian secular modernists’ attempts to banish all that is irrational, and Islamic reformist efforts to purify the religion from all superstition and to highlight the rational nature of Islam. Mittermaier pays particular attention to the way that Islamic reformists and Egyptian secular modernists conceptualise dreams. It seems that many secular modernists dismiss the idea that dreams might emanate from a divine source and that some Islamic reformists question the reliability of ordinary, contemporary believers’ claims of having experienced dreams sent from God and that both these parties consider their conceptualisations of dreams as modern and progressive.

This sense that talk of divinely inspired dreams was somehow irrational or superstitious perhaps explains one informant’s, Hoda’s, self-consciousness about discussing her mother’s istikhāra experience. Hoda’s story will be further discussed in the next section, but suffice to say her mother had had a rather vivid dream that placed the future of her engagement into question. Hoda was quite convinced that this dream was generated by God and was thus ‘alarmed and upset’ when she heard

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8 Instead of casting herself as a slightly naive young girl who became emotionally attached to a boy of questionable suitability, she portrayed herself as a person who had become mistakenly attached to the wrong man, became increasing unsettled and ultimately turned to God.
of it. She thus began to re-evaluate her relationship. In the course of telling me about this she repeatedly and anxiously declared ‘you must think I’m mad’. I sought to reassure her, stating I knew a number of others who had had similar kinds of experiences. Whilst Hoda did not surrender her own beliefs about the nature of her mother’s experience, she was clearly influenced by the existence of the view that the belief that one’s dreams might come from God is irrational and/or superstitious.

When describing the dissolution of her relationship Hoda mentioned that her fiancé had repeatedly urged her to explain why she had decided to break up. Hoda refused to respond to him. She wanted a clean break and did not want to start casting aspersions. Yet it struck me that Hoda could have quite neutrally stated that following istikhāra prayer, her mother had had a dream which led her to believe that their relationship was not God’s will. Jedrej and Shaw state that dreams can serve to justify and explain ‘unintelligible actions’ (Jedrej & Shaw 1992: 8), yet thinking about Hoda’s story it struck me that dreams could only serve this function if people shared similar conceptualisations of the nature of the dream. In a society as diverse as that of Egypt this could by no means be guaranteed.

**Parallel Prayers**

In the course of my fieldwork, I came to realise that the performance of ṣalāt al-istikhāra with reference to the continuation of a given relationship was not restricted to the prospective husband/wife him/herself but may in-fact be enacted by others. In fact, three informants told me that their mother’s had performed istikhāra for this purpose. Their stories follow below.

In November 2010, I was placed in contact with a girl who had been through a failed engagement. She seemed to be recovering but you could tell that she had been incredibly hurt by the experience. She had met her ex-fiancé at university when she was just 20 years old. He was also a student and thus, according to her, was in ‘no position to propose’. In other words, he lacked the economic and professional capital to issue a proposal. Yet in the meantime with her mother’s consent, the couple began to date. They continued dating for three years and during that time had built up a
sense of emotional closeness. Finally, having graduated from university and gained a year’s experience in business, he approached her father to ask for her hand in marriage. She was initially delighted but soon thereafter problems began to arise. Chief among these were her fiancé’s and his father’s insensitive approach to negotiating the cost of the marital jewellery and the process of finding a suitable conjugal home. She was slightly perturbed by her fiancé’s recent behaviour but was so attached to him she decided to press on with the engagement. So Hoda and her family continued making preparations for their forthcoming engagement party. Hoda and her ex-fiancé jointly decided to hold the engagement party on the same date the couple first started courting. However, somewhat unfortunately, this happened to coincide with the final football match for the African cup. She claimed that in actual fact the entire celebration was overshadowed by this match. Many male friends and relatives insisted upon watching the match before the formal parts of the celebration began and many other guests arrived late due to traffic. Her mother was particularly disturbed by the evening’s events and was unsure as to whether she should continue supporting her daughter’s relationship. So, that night she performed ṣalāt al-istikhāra. She awoke the next morning having dreamt that ‘beast-like creatures’ were carrying Hoda to her grave.

That morning, at breakfast time, Hoda’s mother told her about her dream. Hoda was ‘alarmed and upset’ and began to think more critically about her relationship. Hoda’s response to her mother’s words must be considered in light of the fact that many Muslims imbue dreams with a considerable sense of authority. This authority stems from the belief that some dreams are sent by God (Edgar 2011; Mittermaier 2011). For this reason, a person who lies about a dream is seen to have committed a serious transgression. They are seen to have misappropriated God’s authority. Hoda eventually broke up with her fiancé; the breaking point for her was when she was hospitalised with appendicitis. She already suffered from irritable bowel syndrome and told me that the stress of her relationship had exacerbated it to such an extent she had to have her appendix removed. Hoda’s parents had already spoken to her about their worries regarding the relationship; they spoke about her ex-fiancé’s conduct, her mother’s rather disturbing dream and their concern for her now she was unwell. Lying on the hospital bed, Hoda eventually decided enough was enough and decided
to end the relationship. She was quite insistent that this was her decision but stated that it was guided by her parent’s words. After all, when her mother told her about her dream she was ‘alarmed and upset’ and began to think more critically about her relationship. The prayers and dreams of her mother came to shape her actual, waking life.

Another young married Egyptian woman, Mona, spoke of her mother’s performance of ṣalāt al-istikhāra with connection to her relationship. Her story was rather less dramatic than that of Hoda’s but was nonetheless very interesting. Mona’s family had migrated to America when she was a child but would regularly visit family in Egypt. At sixteen, she met her now husband, through a mutual friend. They built up a firm friendship and subsequently began to date. At eighteen, Mona decided to return to Cairo to begin her undergraduate studies. She lived in the family home whilst her parents remained in America and she continued to date the man who is now her husband. Her mother was aware of this situation and was somewhat uneasy. And so, she sought guidance from God; she prayed istikhāra. Mona’s mother did not exactly receive anything she would label as a ‘sign’ but found that her anxieties about her daughter’s relationship had lifted. The fact that the couple dated prior to engagement remains something of a contentious issue amongst other family members, who question the propriety of such conduct. Yet the fact that Mona’s mother performed istikhāra, helps insulate her from criticism. She had sought God’s guidance and had found that she subsequently felt at peace with her decision not to intervene.

The relationship between maternal intervention and ṣalāt al-istikhāra was also raised in an interview with a 26 year-old fiancé. Karim had been formally engaged for two months and since that time his mother had been less than happy with the quality of her relationship with his fiancée’s family. He explained that his parents came from Sohag in Upper Egypt and only moved to Cairo shortly after his father’s graduation. Thus, he argued, she holds what he described as a slightly ‘traditional’ view of marriage. His mother sees marriage as a merging of families and is particularly keen to get to know his fiancée’s relatives. In contrast, he claimed his fiancée’s parents are rather ‘westernised’ and view marriage as binding individuals rather than groups. Hence they are not particularly interested in meeting his wider family and often
behave in what his mother perceives as a ‘distant’ manner. This clash in perspectives over the nature of marriage has created some tension and this tension provoked his mother to perform ṣalāt al-istikhāra to determine whether she should change her ways. At the time I spoke to him, Karim’s mother was still waiting for a response.

Despite their manifold differences, all three accounts of maternal performance of ṣalāt al-istikhāra reveal motherly anxiety about their offspring’s developing relationships. For Hoda’s mother, ṣalāt al-istikhāra was about determining whether she should continue supporting a relationship in which she felt her daughter was being mistreated. For Mona’s mother, ṣalāt al-istikhāra was about deciding whether she should do more to protect her daughter’s innocence, whether she should regulate her blossoming relationship. For Karim’s mother, ṣalāt al-istikhāra was about seeking guidance on the legitimacy of her behaviour around and misgivings towards her prospective in-laws. All three accounts demonstrate wider kin involvement in the marriage-making process. They demonstrate that anxiety and uncertainty surrounding marriage-making affects persons beyond the bride and groom and the genuine desire of relatives to protect their kin from the pain associated with unsuccessful and/or unhappy relationships.

It is interesting to note that all three cases involved mothers praying istikhara in order to seek God’s guidance in relations to matters pertaining to their child’s conjugal future. Indeed, I never heard of, and foolishly failed to ask, if fathers or others performed this ritual in such circumstances. Is this mere coincidence or does this tell us something about the mother’s role in the marriage-making process? All I can say is that, in accordance with many others, I believe that the mother’s role in the production of alliances should not be overlooked (El-Kholy 2002; Wikan 1980; Hoodfar 1997). Indeed my informants described their mothers’ prominent role in arranging introductions, vetting prospective partners, procuring the shabka and many other activities relating to marriage. Given this level of involvement, the fact that mothers perform istikhāra about such matters is, perhaps, of little surprise.
Guidance of an Exclusive Kind

Many of my informants believed that one’s access to and understanding of God’s guidance is contingent upon one’s own religiousness. This belief was made particularly apparent in cases in which a person felt they were somehow not worthy enough to perform ṣalāt al-istikhāra and in cases in which a person performed istikhāra and God seemed either to fail to respond or provide comprehensible advice.

When a young Egyptian husband who feared the responsibility of marriage told me of the considerable anxiety and confusion he felt in the planning stages of marriage, I asked if he had performed istikhāra. I received a rather humble response. He began by explaining that he was not particularly religious, that he rarely prayed, that he drank alcohol and was not very disciplined whilst fasting. He thus argued he would feel uncomfortable seeking advice from a God he had hitherto distanced himself from. He felt that in doing so, he would be using God. How could he expect God’s help when he had been so neglectful of his religious duties? More than that, he feared that if he did pray istikhāra he would struggle to both recognise God’s guidance and to put his faith in Him and act according to His will. He thus refrained from performing istikhāra.

A similar tale emerged in the course of an interview with a young divorcée. Towards the end of the interview, I asked her if there was anything she would have done differently. She provided a rather moving response stating that if she could turn back time she would have paid closer attention to various flaws in her fiancé’s character and also prayed istikhāra. In the weeks leading up to her marriage, she had had a number of panic attacks and was struggling with considerable anxiety and doubt. She was hugely tempted to place herself in ‘God’s hands’, to pray istikhāra but at that time she did not feel she was ‘good enough’ to do so. She explained that her father was an incredibly religious man and constantly criticised her for not being modest or pious enough. She used to take his criticism to heart and genuinely believed she was not worthy of God’s assistance and thus did not perform istikhāra. She now realised that her father was excessively critical and whilst she recognised that she is not without faults, she saw herself as a good person who could have performed this prayer and possibly benefited from God’s advice. Whilst she still believed God’s
guidance was a ‘gift’ that was only bestowed upon ‘good’ people, she thought she was mistaken in believing she was not included in this category and thus denying herself the opportunity to pray *istikhāra*.

This sense that one’s access to, and understanding of, God’s guidance was dependent upon a person’s piety was echoed in one husband’s attempts to explain the seeming absence or incomprehensibility of God’s guidance. This husband recalled with some bitterness that shortly before proposing to his present wife he had performed the *istikhāra* prayer but had not received any response. He decided to proceed with their relationship anyway but now questioned the wisdom of this decision. He has two children and has been married for ten years but is desperately unhappy in his relationship and is considering proposing to his cousin. I asked why he felt God had failed to provide a response. He offered two possible explanations. Firstly, that the performance of *ṣalāt al-istikhāra* does not automatically entitle one to God’s guidance, God has the freedom to choose who to help and is more likely to help the faithful than those who, like himself, have neglected their religious duties. Secondly, in truth, he could not be certain that God did not respond to his request for guidance. It is possible that God granted him guidance but he was incapable of recognising the ‘signs’. He believed one’s ability to recognise God’s signs was linked to the strength of one’s religiousness and humbly confessed that he was possibly lacking in this respect.

A similar argument was advanced by Hossam, the young Egyptian man who I described in the ‘troubled times’ section above. He stated that he made *istikhāra* immediately prior to proposing to his fiancée and once again when he and his fiancée began to argue about the costs of marriage. I asked him a little about the nature of God’s response and then asked why God seemed to will him to propose yet then appeared to will for the couple to break up. I never dared to frame my question in this way, but in more explicit terms- Did God intend for him to endure the suffering associated with this troubled engagement? Hossam responded by telling me of the loneliness he felt before proposing to his fiancée and by telling me that when he told particularly religious friends of his plans to perform *istikhāra*, they warned him that he should not depend completely on *istikhāra*. They advised that as he was not very
religious he could find firstly, that he received no response; secondly, that he received a response but was unable to recognise it or thirdly that he would correctly discern God’s will but would struggle to follow it. They thus suggested that he should begin praying regularly and then perform *istikhāra*.

Hossam’s friends’ warnings and suggestions appear to postulate a connection between religiousness and the effectiveness of *ṣalāt al-istikhāra*. A person who is religiously weak may not receive, recognise or follow God’s guidance. Indeed Hossam admitted that his initial proposal was less about following God’s will and more about escaping the loneliness which engulfed him. His friends suggested that he should start praying regularly and then perform *istikhāra*. Yet why should regular prayer precede the performance of *istikhāra*? When I asked Hossam why his friends had made this suggestion, I received a fascinating response. He asked, ‘if you picked up the bible and read the Ten Commandments would you follow them if you did not fear God?’ For Hossam, the ability to follow God’s guidance was linked to the ability to fear God. And a deficit in fear could be remedied by regular prayer; through the act of prayer one could acquire the ability to fear God. Prayer, then, was considered to make accepting God’s will substantially easier.⁹

So, regular prayer appeared to make following and accepting God’s will easier. Yet, Hossam’s friends also appeared to suggest that regular prayer would help increase the likelihood that an individual would receive and recognise God’s guidance. So, I continued questioning. Hossam asked me if I made a request would I expect a friend or a stranger to respond. He also asked me if I was more likely to understand a friend or a stranger. In much the same way, prayer helps one get closer to God and thus increases the likelihood that we will receive and recognise God’s response. In this sense, regular prayer is seen to enhance the effectiveness of *ṣalāt al-istikhāra*.

Ultimately, a number of my informants believed God’s guidance was exclusive in nature. Not everyone who faced difficult marital decisions considered themselves worthy enough to seek His help and not all those who seek His help necessarily

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⁹ The notion that fear of God can be consciously cultivated and that ‘virtuous fear is the motivation for, as much as a modality, action’ (Mahmood 2001: 842) is of course echoed in the work of Mahmood (2001, 2005).
receive, recognise or willingly follow His guidance. Hence, full benefit from God’s
guidance was the privilege of the pious. Yet as Hossam effectively argued, one
could, through regular prayer, acquire the requisite religiousness to receive,
recognise and willing follow His advice; one could become a worthy recipient of His
guidance.

**Conclusion**

The investigation and analysis of Ṣalāt al-istikhāra as it pertains to marriage sheds
considerable light upon the impact of uncertainty in decisions relating to marriage. It
is important to note that such decisions are regarded as revocable commitments and
are frequently reviewed in light of new information gleaned during the process of
planning and preparing for marriage. Sometimes this information is a source of
confirmation, yet at other times it is a source of doubt.

In the last few decades, anthropological studies of kinship have placed increasing
emphasis upon the role of the individual in creating and erasing relatedness. I argue
that those who performed istikhāra seemed only too aware of their agency over the
production and destruction of kinship. However, they were also aware that they did
not, indeed could not, completely know their prospective affines and that either their
own or their loved one’s conjugal future was similarly difficult to fathom. For this
reason, the agency they held over the marriage-making process was, to a certain
extent, a source of anxiety. They tried to manage this anxiety by surrendering
themselves to an omniscient and omnipotent God asking:

‘If in Your Knowledge this action ---- is better for my religion and faith,
for my life and end [death], for here [in this world] and the hereafter then
make it destined for me and make it easy for me and then add blessings
in it, for me.’

And
‘In Your Knowledge if this action is bad for me, bad for my religion and faith, for my life and end [death], for here [in this world] and the hereafter then turn it away from me and turn me away from it and whatever is better for me, ordain [destine] that for me and then make me satisfied with it.’

In this way, the performance of *istikhāra* may be viewed as a means of dealing with a perceived excess of agency and deficit of knowledge. It thus provides a means of dealing with the anxiety and uncertainty that so frequently surrounds the cultivation of marriage in Egypt. And in some cases, the performance of *istikhāra* might also provide the worshipper with a means of countering any potential critique of their relational conduct.

Sherine Hamdy (2009) has argued that following God’s will is not always a passive process and in the cases described above, we see that following God’s will involves actively seeking His guidance through the performance of *istikhāra*. We also see that the fate of the worshipper is not perceived to be definitively determined. Instead, as the words contained within this prayer suggest, one can appeal to God to make a certain outcome one’s destiny.

Yet, not everyone who faces difficult marital decisions considered themselves worthy enough to seek God’s help and not all those who seek His help necessarily receive, recognise or willingly follow His guidance. Indeed as Marcel Mauss (2003) and Amira Mittermaier (2011) note, part of what makes prayer, prayer is that God has the agency to decide whether to respond. My informants believed that access to and understanding of God’s guidance was the privilege of the pious. However, one could, through repeated prayer become a worthy recipient of His guidance. The escape from uncertainty that *istikhāra* is often perceived to provide is thus considered to be rather exclusive in nature.

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3 The Shabka and the Fragility of Relatedness

In this chapter I focus upon the role of the *shabka* in the making and breaking of marriage in Egypt. The *shabka* is a gift of jewellery that flows from the family of the groom, or indeed the groom alone, to the bride generally at the point of engagement. The term itself is derived from the same root (sheen-ba-kaaf) as the verb to entwine, entangle or join. The *shabka* generally consists of a set of gold jewellery including one or more ring(s), one or more bracelet(s), a necklace and a pair of earrings. However, more affluent Cairene Muslims tend to express a preference for items of diamond jewellery.

In this chapter, I argue that whilst in some ways the *shabka* is seen to cement, signify and formalise a bond between actual or prospective affines, my informants’ conversations about, and dealings with, the *shabka* also point towards a concern with the fragility of relatedness, a preoccupation that is only intensified by a corollary concern with the fragility of reputation. In many such conversations the uncertain and provisional nature of engagement and the terminable nature of marriage was actively acknowledged. The vulnerability of women entering into matrimony was, moreover, often highlighted.

Lynn Welchman observes how many Egyptians view the *shabka* as proof of ‘the seriousness of the groom’ (2004: 51). This was a sentiment that was, as we shall see, echoed by some of my informants. Such proof may be considered particularly desirable given the fact that, as noted in Chapter One, previous intimacies are often seen to adversely affect both a woman’s marriageability and the success of any future relationships. And I would suggest that this partially explains why the provision of a *shabka* is seen as an important precondition for the deepening of acquaintanceship associated with formal engagement.

The *shabka* also plays a role in communicating a woman’s relational status and in commemorating the formation of an alliance. However, in this chapter I argue that one particular item of the *shabka*, a plain band known as the *dibla*, plays a
particularly important role in this regard. This is a point that, as far as I am aware, has not been made by other anthropologists working on this topic but is, certainly within the Cairene context, worth drawing attention to. It would be interesting to determine if the *dibla* is granted distinctive significance by Muslims in other geographic settings.

A number of anthropologists working within the Middle East have commented that marital jewellery provides a woman with a certain degree of financial protection from the material hardships often associated with widowhood and divorce. They also comment that marital jewellery can be sold in the event of unanticipated financial issues within the context of marriage e.g. unemployment (Moors 1994; Ibrahim and Singerman 2001; Wikan 1980; Welchman 2004). This was, likewise, repeated by my informants. I would suggest that any analysis of the financial protection afforded by the *shabka* would be productively informed by Appadurai’s work on commodities, exchange and value. In this work, Appadurai challenges the idea that objects possess any intrinsic economic value. Instead he argues that economic value is created through the act of exchange and that goods that are deemed non-exchangeable are devoid of economic value, they are priceless. His work also provides a particularly novel approach to the anthropological analysis of commodities. Appadurai challenges the idea that commodities possess some ‘magic distinction’ from ‘other sorts of thing’ (Appadurai 1986: 13) that is both immutable and intrinsic to the object itself. He instead argues that we should consider ‘the commodity potential of all things’ (Appadurai 1986: 13), asserting that objects can be commoditised and decommoditised over time and that a given object may be temporarily defined as a commodity if ‘its exchangeability (past, present, future) for some other thing is its socially relevant feature’ (Appadurai 1986:13).

Drawing inspiration from Appadurai, in this chapter I illustrate that marital jewellery would not be able to deliver the kind of financial protection described above unless women were prepared to turn it from a gift into a commodity for exchange. This is an issue that has been insufficiently explored by the academic literature which, in my view, tends to provide a rather cursory description of the protective potential of such jewellery. In the course of fieldwork, I found this process of commoditising the
shabka was far from straightforward, that in some contexts, a certain sense of stigma and moral ambiguity surrounded the sale of marital jewellery. In Appadurai’s terms, the ‘commodity potential’ (Appadurai 1986: 13) of the shabka was, as we shall see, stifled by various social forces. I also found that some items of the shabka seemed less alienable and harder to transfer or commoditise than others. Once again the dibla is particularly noteworthy in this respect. Yet to return to my main point, this concern with the protective value of the shabka serves, in many ways, to underscore the fact that the pursuit of marriage is regarded as a risky process with uncertain and, occasionally undesirable, outcomes.

Symbolising Relational Status

A number of my informants stated that the shabka served to communicate a woman’s relational status. However, they seemed to attribute particular semiotic significance to a plain ring known as the dibla. The dibla is a fundamental component of a woman’s shabka but is also an item of jewellery commonly worn by attached Egyptian men. Indeed the dibla is seen to signal if a man or woman is engaged or married. Yet the way in which it fulfils this function is of particular interest. In Egypt, people do not make a distinction between engagement and wedding rings. In fact there is no direct Arabic translation for these two terms. Instead a single ‘dibla’ is worn on the right hand during the engagement and transferred to the left hand upon marriage. Hence the way the jewellery is worn has an impact upon what the signifier (dibla) signifies (engagement/marriage).

In the course of my fieldwork, the transfer of the dibla was a source of considerable comment. A few of my female friends rather quaintly remarked that, just as a man is, upon marriage, closer to a woman’s heart, so too is the ring that he has given her. The fact that the dibla is, upon marriage, transferred to the left hand means that this is quite literally the case. Others spoke about the timing of this transfer. Working class informants told me that the dibla is transferred immediately after the consummation of the marriage (ad-duxla). Yet middle and upper class informants commented, and indeed I have witnessed at actual celebrations, that the transfer of
rings occurs after the cutting and reciprocal feeding of the wedding cake. It is important to note that working class Cairenes tend to view wedding cakes as an unnecessary extravagance and stated that the custom of transferring the ring after cutting the cake was, for material reasons, not practised in working class neighbourhoods. The practice of transferring the ring immediately after the consummation of marriage was treated by a few middle and upper class Cairenes with particular disdain. It was regarded as a particularly vulgar, working class custom that they would not consider undertaking. Thus it seems that the timing of the marking of newly married status is coloured by class. Yet, whilst the cutting of cake or consummation of a relationship are seen as particularly apt moments for the transfer of the ring, nobody ever mentioned transferring the *dibla* immediately after the writing of the marriage contract. This points towards a dissonance between legal and broader social definitions of relational status, which will be explored further in Chapter Five.

Yet, for now, it is important to highlight that rings are seen to play an important role in communicating a person’s relational status. The wearing of a ring is thus generally seen to help pre-empt any inappropriate advances. However, in a more general conversation about Islamic conditions of marriage, one female informant argued that in an urban environment like Cairo, where one frequently encounters unknown others, wearing a ring may be seen as one amongst many simple and practical ways of ensuring the fulfilment of the sunni condition of *al-ishhār* (broadcast/announcement). In both these respects, the semiotic importance of the *dibla* is actively recognised and is seen to help uphold the integrity and legitimacy of a union.

**Jewellery and Memory**

From commemorating romantic gestures to anxieties about a second-hand *shabka*, memory played a key role in a number of my informants’ conversations about the *shabka*. Many jewellers mentioned that engraving the name of one’s life partner and the date of either one’s engagement party or one’s contract-writing ceremony upon the inner surface of the *dibla* was a widely-practised custom. I suggest that this key
practice serves to at least partially decommoditise this particular item of jewellery. When I asked my informants about this practice I received two particularly interesting responses. Mona, a married informant mentioned in the previous chapter, commented that the engagement party and the contract-writing ceremony were not particularly significant dates in her and her husband’s relational history, that as far as she was concerned, these events simply legitimised an already existing relationship. Instead, for her and her husband the date the couple first began courting was the most important date in their relational history. Yet, engraving this date upon the ring before the wedding would have generated some controversy. Whilst both sets of parents eventually accepted the fact that the couple dated, they would have objected to the history of Mona and her husband’s relationship being recorded in this fashion. It could attract the attention of relatives who were distant enough not to already know of the couple’s courtship but would nonetheless feel entitled to criticise or openly question the propriety of their conduct. So, the couple decided to secretly engrave their chosen date after their wedding.

Mona was not alone in deviating from cultural conventions surrounding the engraving of the dibla. Indeed, Karim confessed with much pride that his fiancée and he had decided to defy tradition and inscribe their respective names and the date they had declared their love for one another on the inside of the dibla. For him, this date was worth preserving in memory. He told me how, after proposing but before celebrating the engagement party, he took the bold decision of declaring his love to his, then, quasi-fiancée. He had spoken to his fiancée’s sister and asked her to ensure that they would both be at home one Saturday afternoon and to encourage her sister to order a salad. And so her sister pretended to call a local cafe for a salad delivery but in fact called Karim. Karim prepared the salads, dressed up as a delivery boy and brought two salads he had personally prepared to their home. In his fiancée’s salad, he included a note professing his love. His fiancée was surprised yet delighted to receive his note and phoned him immediately to tell him his feelings were reciprocated. This was a joyful and meaningful moment in their relational history, a moment they wished to commemorate by engraving its date in the inside of their

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1 It must be noted that Mona was very unusual in this respect.
diblas. Thus, whilst the custom of engraving dates upon the *dibla* ordinarily serves to commemorate *public* and *official* milestones in the formation of an alliance, this custom can be modified in a way that allows a couple to commemorate alternative moments in their relational trajectories. In this way the *dibla* becomes a vehicle for commemorating a rather more personalised and, perhaps, less official history.

The relationship between jewellery and memory surfaced once again when a jeweller told me that sometimes women would come to his shop and “upgrade” items of the *shabka*. This might mean the exchange of an item for something of higher value or the addition of an extra gem. Somewhat puzzled, I spoke to an unmarried friend about this phenomenon, asking how could women choose to change their *shabka* in this way. This friend was surprised by my puzzlement and asked if nothing similar happened in the UK. She stated that in her view, the upgrade of a wife’s jewellery was a sign of a husband’s continued affection and she could only dream of marrying a man who was financially equipped and emotionally sensitive enough to make such a gesture. Yet, perhaps more significantly, she stated that people never upgraded the *dibla*. Whilst other items of the *shabka* might well accrue sentimental value and be imbued with certain memories, the *dibla* seemed particularly significant in this regard. This last point will be illustrated further with the experience of a twenty-four year-old who after the breakdown of her engagement sold off every item of her *shabka* except the *dibla*.

I made reference to the breakdown of Sabah’s engagement in the previous chapter when I discussed her performance of *ṣalāt al-istikhāra* and her belief that God had separated her from her fiancé due to an absence of equivalence in their respective levels of piety. She had already told me that her *shabka* consisted of a *dibla*, another gold ring, a bracelet and a necklace. And so I asked Sabah what she did with the *shabka* after the breakdown of her relationship. I had not intended to embarrass her but noticed she looked a little uncomfortable. So I quickly apologised and suggested we change the topic. Yet she reassured me and proceeded to answer my question. She explained that a year after breaking up with her fiancé, she decided it was time to

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2 A similar idea was advanced by some of Chan’s informants. These informants came from Chinese communities in Hong Kong and Singapore and Chan argued reaffirmed their relationships after marriage through the purchase of new wedding rings (Chan 2006).
forget. And so she went to a jewellers and sold all items of her *shabka* apart from the *dibla*. She deposited the proceeds of this sale in her bank account but has yet to spend any of it. Accompanied by her sister, she threw the *dibla* into the Nile. I asked her why she had not opted to sell the *dibla* as well. She explained that her *dibla* was relatively simple, already engraved and that selling it did not feel ‘right’.

Whilst all items of the *shabka* were, to a certain extent, imbued with meaning and memory, their disposal, after all, was seen as an important stage in the process of forgetting, the *dibla* was seen as particularly important in this respect. Kopytoff asserts that the process of decommoditising an object is an act of ‘singularisation’ (Kopytoff 1986:73) and the process of commoditising an object is a process of homogenisation. In accordance with this theory, I would suggest that one of the reasons why selling the *dibla* did not feel ‘right’ was because Sabah was, to all intents and purposes, unable to strip it of its singularity. Her fiancé’s name and the date of their engagement party was engraved upon its inner surface. It thus held a particularly special place in commemorating her relationship, and had a uniqueness that made its commoditisation morally ambiguous and marginally impractical. I would therefore argue that ‘singularisation’ (Kopytoff 1986:73) is somehow less reversible for the *dibla* than for other items of the *shabka* and would highlight that the process of decommoditisation can entail material modifications, such as engraving, as well as conceptual changes.

Concern about the alienability of a given object featured in another informant’s comments about her acceptance of a second-hand-shabka. Nariman had met her husband at just nineteen years old. At that time, 2004, the internet was relatively new to Egypt. Few people had internet connection in their homes and so internet cafes became ‘hip’ places to hang out and were, for many, the only way they could access the World Wide Web. Nariman began to regularly attend an internet cafe in Heliopolis. The manager of this cafe was particularly attentive to her needs and soon enough they became friends. They began to spend time together outside the internet cafe and after a couple of months he proposed. Yet after she got engaged, Nariman began to reassess her relationship with her fiancé; she realised that a likeable friend was not necessarily a good husband. As much as she enjoyed her fiancé’s company,
she did not think he was mature enough to raise a family. At the age of twenty-eight he had yet to graduate and in Nariman’s view did not take his future seriously enough. She was uncertain of his dependability as a husband and as a father, and so she decided to break off their engagement.

Hassan was devastated but he remained in touch with Nariman and they occasionally saw one another at friends’ gatherings. Yet, some time later, Hassan got engaged again and so their relationship grew more distant. Then, out of the blue, Hassan called Nariman and they agreed to meet for coffee. Hassan confessed that his engagement had disintegrated and that he still had feelings for Nariman. Nariman was shocked but secretly flattered. They began to spend more time together and Hassan proposed once again. Nariman accepted and this time she was convinced of Hassan’s suitability as a husband. And so, their families set about preparing for their marriage, including the provision of the shabka. One evening, whilst Nariman was visiting Hassan’s family, Hassan’s mother took time to speak to her alone. She explained that they still had Hassan’s ex-fiancée’s shabka and if they were to resell it they would lose about 2000 LE (about £250). She thus tentatively suggested that Nariman just look at the jewellery to see if she liked it but reassured her that if she didn’t they would be more than happy to replace it. As it happened, Nariman did in fact like the jewellery and agreed to accept it as a shabka and go shopping with Hassan for a dibla.

Nariman’s parents were divorced and she used to live with her father, so later in the week, whilst visiting her mother, she mentioned that she had accepted Hassan’s ex-fiancée’s jewellery. Her mother was furious, she felt her daughter had been too compliant and regardless of whether she liked the jewellery or not, she should have demanded that Hassan’s family buy her a new shabka. She did not sympathise with the fact that Hassan and his family had already lost out when he resold Nariman’s jewellery when they first broke-up and would lose out again if Nariman was unwilling to accept his ex-fiancée’s shabka. She argued that if he was truly committed to their forthcoming marriage he would be willing to make sacrifices. Ultimately, Nariman’s mother construed the jewellery as a bad omen for her daughter’s relationship. Her daughter had shown excessive compliance, her
prospective in-laws had demonstrated a hesitancy to make sacrifices and she worried the jewellery would act as a constant reminder of Hassan’s ex-fiancée.

Nariman rejected her mother’s concerns, arguing that she was already confident of Hassan’s commitment and his family’s willingness to make sacrifices on her behalf. She therefore did not see the point in ‘taunting’ them by demanding that they provide a brand new shabka of the value specified by her father. She further argued that jewellery was just jewellery, the fact that it once belonged to Hassan’s ex-fiancée was of little consequence. In fact, counter to her mother’s predications, she rarely thought about her jewellery in relation to Hassan’s ex-fiancée. Thus Nariman believes jewellery is considerably more alienable than her mother had initially suggested. Whilst she does remember that her shabka once belonged to Hassan’s ex-fiancée, she does not feel that the jewellery itself serves as a constant, overbearing or unsettling reminder of this relationship or of Hassan’s ex-fiancée herself. Of course Nariman’s jewellery had a history, but that history did not haunt Nariman.

In all the cases described in this section, the dibla is somehow set apart from the rest of the shabka. Indeed Sabah sold all items of her shabka except the dibla. Nariman accepted her fiancé’s ex-fiancée’s jewellery but went shopping for a new dibla. And whilst women might ‘upgrade’ other items of jewellery, they do not ‘upgrade’ the dibla. It seems that the sentimental and interpersonal meaning and memory of this gift is concentrated upon the dibla. In this sense the dibla is, perhaps, less alienable than other items of the shabka and thus its ‘commodity potential’ (Appadurai 1986: 13) is much trickier to realise.

The Cost of the Shabka

None of my informants reported giving or being given inherited jewellery. Instead the shabka was bought at a jewellery store and thus its cost was relatively transparent. Interestingly, the cost of the shabka was generally actively negotiated and agreed upon by the fiancé (and his father) and the fiancée’s father before the couple and indeed their families visit the jewellery store. The very fact that the
amount spent on the *shabka* is formally agreed in this manner appears to suggest that this is not a voluntary and spontaneous offering. It must instead be recognized that the man is virtually compelled to offer his fiancée a gift of jewellery if he wishes to marry her.

In the process of conducting informal interviews with a number of jewellers, I learnt that negotiations about the cost of the *shabka* were influenced by a variety of factors including class, financial ability, parental support of a given union and the cost of various relatives’ marital jewellery. Whilst class-based differences in the cost of jewellery were quantitative in nature, they were, at least partially affected by a qualitative distinction between the types of jewellery transacted by Egyptians of different class. Many jewellers reported that whilst a majority of young first-time Egyptian brides received gifts of gold, elite Egyptian brides and indeed their families expected the *shabka* to include items of diamond jewellery. This distinction in the composition of elite and non-elite forms of *shabka* raises the cost of an elite woman’s marital jewellery. If she is to uphold class-based norms, the *shabka* must be sufficient for the purchase of diamonds.

The cost of the *shabka* is also influenced by genealogical order and notions of dignity. A father is unlikely to consent to a fiancé spending less on the *shabka* (and providing less weight in gold) than he had previously spent or given to his wife and his sons-in-law had spent on or given to any older daughters. Underlying this convention is the belief that negotiating a suitable *shabka* is a paternal duty that demonstrates a father’s desire to protect his daughter. This is a belief that is shaped by the view that the provision of a suitable *shabka* might serve as proof of the ‘seriousness of the groom’ (Welchman 2004: 51) and that the *shabka* can provide a certain degree of financial protection from the material hardships associated with widowhood and divorce. And in accordance with this belief, any departure from this convention is seen as either a socially unacceptable transgression of kinship values and cultural norms or as an understandable yet undesirable outcome of an exceptional shift in circumstances such as those occasionally brought about by a death in the family.
Yet a variety of other factors also play a role in the negotiation of the cost of the shabka. Indeed, many jewellers commented that if a bride’s family are supportive of a given union they are likely to demonstrate a certain degree of willingness to adjust their demand for a shabka of a given cost in accordance with the groom’s financial circumstances. If, however a bride’s family holds reservations about a given union, they are less likely to display such flexibility and may in fact strategically increase their demands in order to either test a prospective groom’s commitment or to drive him away (see Moors 1994). In this respect, the negotiation of the cost of the shabka can serve as a vehicle for the expression of parental resistance to a given union. This is particularly pertinent for those individuals who regard outright opposition to, and vetoing of, an offspring’s choice in marital partner as backwards and traditional.\(^3\)

In the course of discussing Egypt’s alleged marriage crisis, a male acquaintance of mine began to strongly criticise what he regarded as the excessive material demands of Egyptian families. He then moved on to retell a hadith in which the prophet Mohammed claimed that the shabka could consist of nothing more than a simple iron ring. He ultimately asserted that requests for gold or diamond jewellery could not be religiously justified and were motivated by simple greed. Yet as the last few paragraphs demonstrated, negotiations surrounding the cost and/or composition of the shabka are not informed simply by greed or lack thereof but are instead influenced and indeed complicated by a range of other factors such as class, definitions of paternal duty and approval of or confidence in a given union.

Even when negotiations have been undertaken and a budget has been agreed, the cost of the shabka is by no means set in stone. Indeed, many jewellers related how, on a number of occasions, a prospective bride had been drawn to a particular piece of jewellery only to find its cost exceeded the budget agreed by the fiancé and fiancée’s father. On such occasions, the fiancée’s father will often intervene and agree to make up the difference. In this way the shabka became not only a gift from the family of the prospective groom but also a kind of gift from the prospective bride’s father. One particular jeweller argued these kind of tense situations arise because customers, particularly young brides, are not very adept at estimating the cost of a given item of

\(^3\) This sentiment was most often expressed as such and such ‘only happens in the countryside’.
jewellery and that jewellers themselves rarely visibly display their price. Instead a customer is expected to select a few items and then wait for the jeweller to weigh them, calculate their cost in relation to the international price of gold and then, depending on the degree of workmanship add a little extra to determine their asking price. The final price can then be negotiated by the jeweller and the customer. He claimed that the nature of such retail practices means that brides often express their preference for a given item before its price has been established and thus the tense situations described earlier take place relatively frequently. He thus argued that many such incidents might be avoided if more jewellers displayed items according to their weight e.g. 100g, 125g etc.

A number of jewellers also noted that the cost of the *shabka* often takes account of the international price of gold. A father will rarely accept a gold *shabka* which weighs less than that which he provided his wife. Since the recent economic crisis, the price of gold has risen dramatically. Fiancés and fiancée’s fathers find themselves re-negotiating the cost of the *shabka*. A sum negotiated say six months earlier is no longer sufficient to buy the amount of gold previously specified by the father. Hence, they will debate the fixedness and flexibility of each part of their agreement. The fiancé will invariably argue that the cost of the *shabka* should not be altered but the agreed weight of the gold should be subject to modification. Conversely, the fiancée’s father will state that the agreed weight of gold should remain the same and thus the price of the *shabka* will inevitably change. One jeweller stated that the bride’s father tends to prevail on this matter and for this reason many engagements are delayed whilst a groom works to save up for this unanticipated rise in cost. In such cases, the timing of a couple’s marriage has been shaped by the economic crisis, the most intimate processes can be affected by global macro-economic events.

Thus far, I have provided a fairly broad overview of the sheer diversity of phenomena which come to influence the negotiation of the cost of the *shabka*. In the remainder of this section, I describe the experiences of three informants for whom the negotiation of the cost of the *shabka* acquired particular significance. In the previous chapter, I mentioned that, prior to her disastrous engagement party and her
mother’s disturbing dream, Hoda was slightly perturbed by her fiancé and his father’s insensitive approach to negotiating the cost of the *shabka*. So how did Hoda’s fiancé approach this negotiation and why was his approach considered insensitive? Hoda stated that she was not present for the formal negotiation of the cost of the *shabka*, that in fact these negotiations were carried out by her father, her fiancé and her fiancé’s father. However, her father had spoken to her prior to this meeting and they had mutually agreed that 30,000 LE would be an appropriate figure. Yet her fiancé and his father insisted they were simply *unable* to spend anything more than 25,000 LE on this gift. Hoda’s father spoke with his daughter and came to realise how much she cared for her fiancé and thus eventually accepted a *shabka* of a value of 25,000 LE.

Then, she claimed, just three months after forging this agreement, she discovered her fiancé and his father had misrepresented their capabilities. Hoda learnt that her fiancé’s family had spent 5,000 LE for membership of an exclusive sporting club. She considered this membership a needless luxury and was hurt that her fiancé’s family had, in her view, prioritised membership of a sporting club over the desire to meet her family’s expectations. Hoda was quick to argue that she was not concerned with the *shabka* itself but rather the *way* he negotiated its cost. Hoda described her fiancé’s conduct as insensitive because, in her view, he had treated their marriage negotiations like a commercial transaction. She compared the way he negotiated the cost of the *shabka* with the way one bargains with a salesman, arguing he had erroneously assumed that ‘paying less is always best’. In doing so, he transformed what should have been an emotional transaction characterised by the display of generosity and selflessness into a business transaction characterised by cutting cost and had deeply offended her in the process. For Hoda, then, the process of negotiating the *shabka* was freighted with emotional significance.

In contrast, for Karim’s prospective mother-in-law, the actual cost of the *shabka* was imbued with affective meaning. Karim’s fiancée was a sister of one of his friends, they first met whilst volunteering at a local orphanage and met again whilst distributing food packages for Ramadan. Shortly thereafter, they began to spend time together and became firm friends. Soon thereafter, they began to date and they are
now engaged. After Karim proposed, the two families agreed that the engagement would last a period of two years. Karim’s fiancée was only twenty years old, so this allowed her to spend a year completing her education and another year working before getting married. Whilst Karim was impatient to marry, he acknowledged that an engagement of this length would allow him to save up enough money for marriage. His parents supported him in this endeavour but at the age of twenty six and receiving a modest income as a telecommunications engineer, he experienced the obligation to save for a marriage that would meet the expectations of his fiancée’s family as something of a burden. He described how he had initially planned to buy his fiancée gold jewellery but that her mother had insisted he buy a solitaire. She justified her uncompromising stance towards the composition of the *shabka* (and thus in indirect terms its cost) with reference to the length of the couple’s engagement. She was, it seemed, keenly aware of the fragile and terminable nature of engagements and feared that others might accuse her and her husband of complacency or neglect if they allowed their daughter to remain for such a long time in a relationship without any kind of tangible evidence of his commitment. Hence for Karim’s prospective mother-in-law, a solitaire was a ‘sign of seriousness’ that could be mobilised to allay the concerns and counter the critique of interfering relatives, friends and acquaintances who questioned the wisdom of consenting to an engagement of this kind of length. Whilst Karim was irritated by his prospective mother-in-law’s outlook, he could understand her concerns and was eager to continue with the relationship. His parents, however, were not altogether happy with spending this kind of money on the *shabka* and so, he agreed with them that he would contribute to two thirds of the cost and they would pay for the remaining third.

This sense that the *shabka* can come to express certain sentiments and that its cost can be a source of intergenerational familial conflict was repeated, albeit in rather different terms, by a young Egyptian husband, whom I shall call Tamer. Tamer described his frustration with, and ambivalence about, the way his parents had assumed responsibility for much of the financial costs associated with getting married. On the one hand, he was profoundly grateful to them and knew that he

\[4\] I cannot help but wonder if Karim’s mother-in-law shared these concerns.
would not have been able to marry his wife in a fitting manner without their assistance. Yet on the other hand, he desperately wanted to be able to provide such things for himself. He decided that as the shabka would be the first official gift he would offer his wife he wanted to ensure that he was the sole contributor to its cost. In other words, he did not want the shabka to be a present from his family but to be a gift from him and him alone. Yet he could only afford a half carat diamond ring. Thankfully his fiancée’s parents accepted this arrangement, they supported their relationship and were not about to advertise the grade of the diamond, but his parents were less than happy. His sisters had been given one carat diamonds and his parents kept pressuring him to allow them to contribute, they found the value of this gift embarrassing and feared what his prospective in-laws might think. Yet, he insisted that this was the way he wanted things to be and they eventually acquiesced. This allowed him to gain control over the expressive content of the shabka. He did not want the shabka to be construed as a gift from his family but instead hoped to use the shabka as a vehicle for expressing his willingness to provide, his ability to sacrifice and his personal affection for his fiancée.

In a fascinating analysis of bridewealth and dowry in China, Yunxiang Yan comments that a general tendency to view marriage as a joining of groups has led to a widespread anthropological neglect of the important role of individual brides and bridegrooms in shaping the process and outcome of negotiations about marital prestations (Yan 1996). Whilst in many ways the experience and concerns of Hoda, Karim, and Tamer differ quite significantly, in all three cases the bride or bridegroom was able to exert influence over the final outcome of negotiations about the cost of the shabka. For Hoda this was about encouraging her father to accept a shabka of 25,000 LE. For Karim this was about mobilising his independent earning power in order to satisfy his mother-in-law’s demands despite his parents’ resistance. And finally for Tamer this was about acquiring sole responsibility for the provision of the shabka. Hence in accordance with Yan, I believe the influence of prospective spouses upon the negotiation of the content of marital prestations should not be underestimated.
Yet from a more general perspective, the discussion and analysis in this section serves to demonstrate that the negotiation of the cost of the *shabka* is a highly complex process which is influenced by a multitude of factors. These range from phenomena such as financial ability and shifts in global demand for specific minerals, to concerns with class and reputation to perceptions of paternal duty, levels of parental support for a given union and the desire to control the expressive content of this most significant of gifts. In this way, the act of negotiating the cost of the *shabka* is far from straightforward and any suggestion that it is determined solely by the greed or lack thereof of the bride’s family is fundamentally misconceived.

**Jewellery and Protection**

A number of anthropologists working within the Middle East have argued that marital jewellery can act as a kind of storable wealth that provides a bride with a form of security (*ḍāmān*) (Moors 1994, 2004; Ibrahim and Singerman 2001; Wikan 1980; Welchman 2004). This was a view that was echoed by many of my informants. More specifically, my informants argued that the *shabka* could be sold in order to ameliorate some of the material hardships often associated with divorce, widowhood and any unanticipated decline in familial economic fortune such as unemployment or bankruptcy. In this way the ‘commodity potential’ (Appadurai 1986: 13) of a gift that is seen to cement, signify and formalise a bond between prospective affines is openly acknowledged.

Yet one rather outspoken jeweller was quick to point out that many are hesitant to actually sell their jewellery. Whilst the storage of wealth in its monetary form generally entails the postponement of consumption and investment (Douglas and Isherwood 1996) the storing of wealth as jewellery can at the very same time be a form of consumption (it can be worn), investment (it can accrue value) and much, much more. An awareness of the multi-faceted nature of jewellery helped me understand this specific jeweller’s comments. Much to my dismay, he characterised women as vain spendthrifts and argued that women facing economic upheaval were less likely to sell their jewellery than dispose of their monetary savings. This, he
argued was because, for many women the *shabka* acquired a peculiar kind of sentimental, social and aesthetic value (i.e. as an object of memory, status and beauty), a kind of value that made such women hesitant to relinquish it. These issues will be discussed further in the final section, but for now it must be noted that within this context jewellery is seen as somehow more weighty and less fluid and convertible than money, and this is, perhaps, one of the reasons why it is vested with the task of providing protection at an indeterminate point in the future. I must emphasise, however, that such material protection would not be possible if it was seen as an entirely unexchangeable possession and I suggest that some items of the *shabka*, for example the *dibla*, are seen as less exchangeable than others.

I find this concern with providing women with some kind of material protection through the provision of jewellery interesting in two key ways. Firstly, a couple of jewellers went so far as to suggest that a gift of jewellery could, in extreme circumstances, temporarily rescue a woman from destitution. This suggestion appears to indicate a lack of faith in the protection or assistance of kin. Sa’ar’s (2001) work on Israeli-Palestinian families similarly suggests that Middle Eastern women’s access to familial protection or assistance is not, as is often assumed in the literature, always guaranteed. Secondly, the emphasis many place upon protecting oneself from material hardship within a marriage through the acquisition of jewellery might be seen to point towards an underlying sense of economic uncertainty.

Yet from a slightly different stance, Lynn Welchman observes how many Egyptians view the *shabka* as proof of the ‘seriousness of the groom’ (2004: 51). This was a perception echoed by a number of my informants and as mentioned in the previous section can be mobilised to justify requesting a *shabka* of substantive value. In the section that follows I will describe the experiences of one informant, who believed a *shabka* of higher value might have protected her from the machinations of an uncommitted man.

My informants often talked about the protective value of the shabka in relation to the mahr and vice versa. It is important to stress that the shabka was *not* viewed as a subcategory of the mahr. The mahr unlike the shabka was viewed as a strictly monetary prestation. The mahr is a sum of money that flows from the family of the
groom, ideally, to the bride alone. It is registered in the marriage contract and is divided into two parts. The first part, *al-muGaddam*, is given either prior to or at the point of marriage. The second part, *al-muTaxxar*, can theoretically be given at any point after the legal marriage but is generally seen to be given following widowhood or divorce.\(^5\)

My informants tended to claim that the protection provided by the *shabka* was superior to that provided by the *mahr*. So, why was this the case? First, in recent years the *mahr* was made subject to property tax. The issues created by the introduction of this tax will be discussed further in Chapter Five but, for now, it must be noted that two husbands, a fiancé and two marriage registrars stated that one of the reasons why they or their clients chose to give jewellery rather than a substantive *muGaddam* was to avoid the state tax on the *mahr*.

Throughout my fieldwork, people would in a variety of contexts, vociferously complain about the impact of inflation upon their way of life. Whilst attending a coffee morning, I began talking to a middle-aged, married woman about the *mahr*. She joked about how with each passing year the real value of her *muTaxxar* declined and that if her husband divorced her today, her *muTaxxar* would last barely a week. Whilst this comment was made in a light-hearted fashion, it reveals a more serious issue. In a country with inflation rates such as Egypt, money is no longer very effective at storing value over time. Hence registering a *muTaxxar*, effectively writing a sum of money on a piece of paper, does not provide the same kind of reassurance that it might in a country with lower and more stable levels of inflation. The irony is this: in an economy marred by inflation the longer one spends in a marriage the less the *muTaxxar* is able to protect one from the economic hardships popularly associated with widowhood and divorce. Parents and jewellers would remark that gold and diamonds retain and expand in value in a way that does not apply to money. This, of course is not an intrinsic property of gold and diamonds but a product of their interaction with other agents. Little wonder, then, that comparatively more emphasis is placed on the protective function of the *shabka*.

\(^5\) That is, any divorce except *khul†*. 
In an interview with a family lawyer, I came to learn that the mahr and the shabka have different legal statuses with respect to divorce. In strictly legal terms, the woman retains ownership over the shabka and possesses the right to receive the mahr if a couple dissolve their marriage through ṭalāq (male-initiated divorce) or tafriq (a kind of female-initiated divorce that will only be granted by the courts on very particular grounds such as abandonment). However, a woman will lose her right to receive the muʿtaxxar and will in fact have to return the muGaddam if the marriage is dissolved through khulʿ (female-initiated, no-fault divorce). Yet, interestingly, even where a woman has contracted khulʿ she will retain ownership over the shabka.

So, why is this the case? A woman who initiates khulʿ must first agree to surrender her economic rights. The mahr, unlike the shabka, is legally classified as an economic right. Hence women who initiate khulʿ must return the muGaddam and do not receive the muʿtaxxar yet retain the shabka. Thus a woman initiating khulʿ, who received a token muGaddam but a substantive shabka retains more property and is therefore afforded greater economic protection than if she were to have received a substantive muGaddam and minimal shabka. None of my other informants ever spoke about the shabka in relation to khulʿ; indeed something of a taboo surrounds khulʿ, but I cannot help but wonder if they were aware of the aforementioned legal status of the shabka in the context of no-fault, female-initiated divorce.

So, the shabka does not get taxed, is less sensitive to the devaluing effect of inflation and unlike the mahr may be kept in the context of khulʿ. However, its ability to deliver financial protection was perceived by one rather outspoken bachelor to be compromised by the possibility of theft. This bachelor bemoaned the cost of marriage including the shabka and accused prospective in-laws of greed, to which I responded by mentioning the perceived protective function of the shabka. He replied by arguing that the best way to achieve protection is to vet a prospective husband’s character. He then added that the shabka can be stolen and, for this reason, its ability to help protect one from economic and relational crises is by no means foolproof.
Prior to entering the field, I read a media article about the practice of hiring marital jewellery in Egypt. This had piqued my curiosity and so I asked a number of jewellers about this practice. My enquiries did not elicit much information on the hiring of jewellery but, quite unexpectedly, inspired a number of comments about the growing popularity of ‘∫abka iṣ-ṣyn’. In literal terms, ‘∫abka iṣ-ṣyn’ translates as marital jewellery of China. Yet my informants utilized this term to refer to any kind of jewellery made from fake gold or other fake minerals. When I quizzed them on the provenance of such objects they acknowledged that jewellery need not originate from China to be labelled ‘∫abka iṣ-ṣyn’. Yet the fact such objects are labelled ‘marital jewellery of China’ is no mere coincidence. In fact, throughout my fieldwork I noticed people, in a variety of contexts, using the terms ‘of China’ or ‘Chinese’ as a by-word for any product of inferior quality, regardless of where it actually comes from. I heard these descriptions being used for furniture made from poor quality wood, fire crackers that did not ignite, tin openers that did not work and a string of beads of mine which rather embarrassingly fell apart.

Many of the jewellers and others I had opportunity to speak to about this topic were rather critical about the growing popularity of fake jewellery. They claimed that such objects are liable to break and argued that ‘∫abka iṣ-ṣyn’ does not provide a young bride with any kind of insurance from economic or relational crises. Yet when I asked if persons purchasing such jewellery were aware of this, their responses became rather more sympathetic. They described the many costs associated with marriage in Egypt, the problematic state of the Egyptian economy and the desire of and pressures upon many young people to marry. Those in poverty faced a stark choice, they either delayed marriage in the vain hope that one day they would be able to marry in a fashion that conformed with their own personal and broader social expectations (expectations which had not fully adjusted to the changing material fortunes of the younger generation) or, they recognised the reality of their current economic circumstances and braced themselves to make a series of compromises in their material expectations which would enable them to marry. One such compromise was the purchase of ‘∫abka iṣ-ṣyn’ in place of the modest gift of gold
older family members formerly anticipated. Whilst the purchase of ‘šabka iṣ-ṣyn’ was a pragmatic response to an intractable problem, it was far from ideal. As mentioned earlier, the buying, receiving and wearing of the *shabka* is an important vehicle for asserting status and for demonstrating one’s desire to protect one’s daughter. Hence a groom who gives, a guardian who accepts, and a bride who wears a substandard *shabka* are likely to experience a certain degree of embarrassment. However, one of the great virtues of ‘šabka iṣ-ṣyn’ is that its surface is purposefully crafted so as not to reveal its essence, to create an impression that something cost more than it actually did. Hence the synthetic quality of ‘šabka iṣ-ṣyn’ helps shield a bride, a groom and a guardian from broader public embarrassment, and one need not reveal its cost. Interestingly, the jewellers I spoke with argued that this kind of deceit was acceptable but insisted that a groom should make the synthetic nature of the *shabka* known to the bride and her family. They argued that a failure to disclose such information gave the bride and her family a false sense of security and encouraged them to take risks based on inaccurate information. Yet that such deceit is largely prevented by the fact that both families tend to be involved in the selection and purchase of this gift. Hence, the ‘fakeness’ of marital jewellery is a secret whose disclosure is conditioned by status anxiety and by conceptions of correct conduct.

The secrecy which surrounds *šabka iṣ-ṣyn* partially explains the fact that in the course of fieldwork only one person told me that their marital jewellery was in fact fake. On the journey to visit a friend in Haram, I spotted a huge mall with bridal dresses displayed in almost every shop window. I quickly noted down the location and decided to return that evening. So that evening, I went inside the mall and introduced myself to a number of bemused shopkeepers asking if they would be willing to participate in my research. At one such shop, I met a twenty-year-old girl called Marwa, she was enthusiastic about my research and very knowledgeable about bridal dresses. So, she made tea and we sat and talked. I was invited to return and did so on two further occasions.

Marwa was due to marry her fiancé in three months time and so, a few weeks after our first encounter, she quit work. She subsequently invited me to visit her at her

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6 Simmel (1950) also notes the role of jewellery in marking status and distinction.
home in Monieb. Marwa’s then fiancé was a Libyan police officer with aspirations of becoming a singer. His sister was married to one of Marwa’s older brother’s friends and he had noticed Marwa and asked if he could be introduced. It is important to note here that Marwa and her five siblings are orphans. Their father had died of a heart attack five years before, and their mother had died three years before of diabetes. Marwa lived in a flat with two of her unmarried brothers in the vicinity of one of her married sisters and her eldest brother, who was also married.

At the time I met her, Marwa had already endured one broken engagement. The length of time it was taking for both parties to materially prepare for marriage had tested their patience and put a strain on their relationship. Marwa and her brother were keen to ensure that she did not go through this kind of emotional upheaval again. Moreover, her less than ideal living conditions (she was sharing a bedroom with two brothers) added a greater sense of urgency to her desire to get married. Hence, Marwa and her brother decided that they were not going to place too many demands on her prospective husband. Even though her sisters had received gold jewellery as their shabka, Marwa and her brother decided they would take the pragmatic step of accepting ‘ṣābka ʿṣyn’. This decision was informed by the exceptional nature of her circumstances and the seeming genuineness of her prospective husband. So, the couple got engaged and went on a few excursions before work commitments forced Marwa’s fiancé to return to Libya.

Marwa’s eldest brother and her fiancé had agreed that he would return to Egypt in April to marry and then they would continue their married life in Libya. However, her fiancé never did return to Egypt in April, he repeatedly made excuses and postponed their wedding, claiming he could not get the time off work. With each week that passed after the proposed wedding date, I saw Marwa get more and more agitated and less and less tolerant of his excuses. After a trip back to the UK, I went to visit Marwa to find that during my absence, her engagement had ended. She explained that by the middle of July she had lost patience and so asked her brother to call her fiancé and confront him. It seemed he had no serious intention to marry. They had been duped. At this point Marwa stated that she should never have accepted ‘ṣābka ʿṣyn’. Had she demanded gold jewellery she might have
discovered his lack of commitment earlier and would not have resigned from her job and found herself dealing with the embarrassing memory of earnestly telling people that her fiancé and she were due to marry soon. Once again, it seems the cost of the shabka was seen as a sign of seriousness and a shabka of minimal value was considered to leave one particularly vulnerable to the machinations of uncommitted men.

The Shabka and the Dissolution of Relationships

Whilst much of the anthropological literature on gift relationships focuses upon the way that gifts can act to forge or maintain bonds (see for example Mauss 1969; Chan 2006), my informants expressed significant interest in the gift, or more specifically the shabka, within the context of relationship dissolution. They universally agreed that a woman held the right to retain ownership over the shabka following widowhood or divorce but disagreed over the fate of the shabka after the breakdown of an engagement. Whilst some argued that a woman should return the shabka regardless of circumstance, others argued that a woman is only obliged to return the shabka if she initiated the break-up.

One bachelor argued that whilst a woman is not obliged to return the shabka if her fiancé initiated the severing of an engagement, she is well advised to do so. He explained that disagreement over the ownership of the shabka often exacerbated and perpetuated conflict between a former fiancé and fiancée and indeed their families. He further stated that the shabka is a significant expense and many families spend a substantial amount of time saving for its purchase. If a couple sever their relationship and the fiancée retains ownership over the shabka, the fiancé’s family will have to spend a further period saving for another shabka before the fiancé can get formally engaged again. This kind of delay can create much bitterness, particularly if a man is keen to settle down. This bitterness might tempt a man and his family to sabotage a girl’s reputation, so she too will experience difficulties in forging another relationship. Hence conflict over ownership of the shabka following the dissolution of an engagement can adversely affect a woman’s marriageability.
A number of jewellers reported that sometimes a certain degree of tension about, amongst other things, the ownership of the *shabka* is also apparent when a couple came to buy the *shabka*. When buying or selling jewellery in Egypt, one is legally obliged to provide a proof of purchase certificate which describes the jewellery in precise detail and records the identity of the owner. This helps prevent theft as anyone who tries to sell jewellery must provide the prospective buyer with the proof of purchase certificate and their ID. The name on the certificate should match the person’s ID. With one exception, all the jewellers I spoke with stated that they generally wrote the name of the bride on the proof of purchase certificate. However, on occasion, a groom would request for his name to be written on the certificate. On such occasions, a heated argument would generally ensue. Such a request is controversial because it is seen to suggest that a groom either does not trust the bride, is not fully committed to the relationship or will in the future seek to exert control over her personal property. Hence, uncertainty about the suitability of a given partner or the durability of the union may come to manifest itself in the very process of purchasing a gift that is often seen to cement, formalise and signify a bond between two parties.

Even though people acknowledged the possibility of selling the *shabka* after the dissolution of a relationship, I noticed a certain degree of embarrassment about or stigma associated with conducting such a sale. Indeed a number of jewellers told me that fiancés, fiancées, divorcées and widows are often too embarrassed to resell their jewellery at a jewellers that they have previously frequented or that is situated within their neighbourhood. Embarrassment about the resale of the *shabka* seemed to be particularly acute in cases in which an engagement had failed. There was an acknowledgement that the *shabka* had not undergone an ‘ideal career’ (Kopytoff 1986) (i.e. stayed with the fiancée until her death) and a fear that, given the brevity of the relationship, one’s actions might be misconstrued.

When I asked Sabah what she had done with the *shabka* after her engagement, she seemed to be particularly keen to emphasise that over a year had passed before she decided to sell the *shabka*, excepting of course the *dibla* which, as noted earlier, was thrown into the Nile, the reason she had done so was to help her forget her ex-fiancé.
In a similar vein, another informant, Hossam, stated that after the breakdown of his engagement, his ex-fiancée had returned the *shabka* to him and then commented, in what felt like a very pointed fashion, that he had ‘forgotten’ where it was. It seems to me that both Hossam and Sabah were trying to convey something about the propriety of their conduct; that neither of them were primarily interested in the sale of the *shabka*, and that the sale was the outcome of a failed relationship and was not in and of itself a motivating reason for either the forging or severing of their respective relationships. Ultimately, they were trying to convey that their conduct within the engagement was not animated by a commodity logic in which ‘things themselves’ (Gregory 1982: 19) rather than the ‘personal relationships’ (Gregory 1982: 19) they mediate are of principal concern.

**Conclusion: Towards an Understanding of Persons and Things**

Towards the beginning of this chapter, I commented that the term *shabka* is derived from the same root (sheen- ba- kaaf) as the verb to entwine, entangle or join. And in many ways, this chapter is framed by the question of if and how the *shabka* does just that. It is important to note here that we are dealing with entanglements between persons and things as well as entanglements between persons. In this chapter, I have described the various ways in which the *shabka* plays a role in communicating a woman’s relational status and have pointed to the central function of the *dibla* in this regard. Items of the *shabka* such as necklaces, bracelets or earrings are attributed with varying degrees of sentimental value. However one item, the *dibla*, is consistently granted distinctive significance. The *dibla* is customarily engraved with the name of one’s partner and with a date associated with one’s relationship. It plays a particularly important role in commemorating a relationship and is thus rather less alienable than other items of the *shabka*. The *dibla*, then, serves to commemorate entanglements between persons and is rather less easy to disentangle from persons than other items of marital jewellery.

For many Cairene Muslims, the provision of a suitable *shabka* is perceived as proof of the ‘seriousness of the groom’ (Welchman 2004: 51), a conviction that tends to be
explained with reference to the fact that its cost is, in all but a small minority of cases, far from inconsequential. At the same time, many Cairene Muslims believe that past intimacies can have a particularly adverse effect upon both a woman’s eligibility and the success of any future relationships and so caution should be exercised to ensure that unmarried women do not unwittingly enter into relationships with men who are less than committed to the prospect of marrying them. For this reason the provision of a suitable *shabka*, an act that is after all widely considered as proof of the ‘seriousness of the groom’ (Welchman 2004: 51), is often regarded as a pre-requisite for the deepening of acquaintanceship associated with formal engagement. So from the bride and her family’s perspective, the practice of providing a suitable *shabka* helps mitigate against one of the risks associated with entanglement and thus facilitates the cultivation of marriage.

Many Cairene Muslims also believe that the *shabka* can provide a certain level of financial protection from some of the material hardships associated with widowhood and divorce. Some believe that the *shabka* can also prove invaluable within the context of marriage in the event of unanticipated financial difficulty e.g. unemployment. Such arguments have already been documented by anthropologists working within the Middle East (Moors 1994; Ibrahim and Singerman 2001; Wikan 1980; Welchman 2004). Yet, it is important to highlight that the *shabka* would not be able to deliver this kind of financial protection unless women were prepared to commoditise it. This is a point that has been somewhat marginalised by others working in this field but is of considerable significance. In this chapter, I have argued that the process of commoditising the *shabka* is far from straightforward. Indeed, in some cases, its sale is accompanied by social stigma, surrounded with moral ambiguity and hindered by sentimental attachment. In Appadurai’s (1986) terms, its ‘commodity potential’ is rather difficult to realise.

The *shabka* is a gift that is often seen to cement, signify and formalise a bond between actual and prospective affines. At the same time, the *shabka* is a gift that both acknowledges and plans for the possibility of the demise of that bond. Indeed, it is vested with the task of providing financial protection from the material hardships associated with widowhood and divorce. And in this respect, the giving and
receiving of the *shabka* sheds light on something of the anxiety which surrounds the forging of conjugal alliance amongst Cairene Muslims. It also provides us with a particularly striking illustration of the fact that within this context divorce not only exists but is *normatively* acknowledged to exist. Indeed the fact that marriage can potentially result in divorce is so thoroughly assimilated into mainstream Cairene Muslim attitudes towards matrimony that customs associated with the forging of alliance (e.g. the giving and receiving of the *shabka*) often make provision for this possibility.
4 Homes and Home-Makers

‘A home constitutes a body of images that give mankind proofs or illusions of stability’ (Bachelard 1994[1964] : 17)

Whilst in the previous chapter I considered the connections between jewellery, relationships and persons, in this chapter I explore the linkages between actual and prospective kin, marriage and homes. I also explore the intersection between alliance, persons and the bridal trousseau, the contents of which tend to make their way into the conjugal home. Whereas numerous anthropologists have illustrated how a home can come to shape and influence the relationships of its residents (Carsten 1995; Tan 2001; Bloch 1995; Miller 2001), in this chapter I demonstrate that homes can affect the cultivation of relatedness before cohabitation has even begun. For many years, academics have observed that homes are not simply physical containers devoid of social consequence and have sought to delineate the many ways in which homes and the people that dwell within them are mutually constitutive. In this chapter, I assert that such an observation is not the preserve of academics alone, that, in actuality many Cairenes are very conscious of the fact that homes are neither socially inert nor insignificant. Yet, that this consciousness is not an abstract or theoretical awareness of the problematic nature of, what Latour describes as, the ‘modern’ belief that humans and non-humans form ‘entirely distinct ontological zones’ (Latour 1993: 10) but in fact serves to productively inform the way in which many approach the process of planning and preparing for marriage.

In the first section of this chapter I consider why the provision of a ‘suitable’ home plays such a pivotal role in relational trajectories. I argue that homes are seen both to predict a man’s ability to act as a protective provider and to have a determining effect upon the fate of a relationship after marriage and that this means that a home of given specifications can act to attenuate the perceived indeterminacy of life after marriage, an indeterminacy that, as the last three chapters illustrate, many Cairenes
struggle with. In the second section I explore how the physical location of the marital home is seen to affect the relationships of its residents and how such views influence the perceived desirability and indeed viability of a given union. I argue that the physical location of the conjugal home is variously seen to affect the cultivation of relatedness amongst prospective affines, the maintenance of relatedness amongst cognates and the extension of relatedness towards future grandchildren. It is therefore, perhaps, little surprise that it constitutes a key consideration in marital negotiations. In the final section, I consider the bridal trousseau, the contents of which are accumulated with the expectation that they will eventually be ‘housed’ in a girl’s marital residence. I describe how the trousseau is seen to prepare a girl for marriage, contribute to marital harmony, affect the everyday domestic life of a woman after marriage and demonstrate kin concern for a girl beyond the point of marriage. Ultimately this chapter advances the argument that imagined conjugal futures in Cairo are mediated and conditioned by both homes and the items contained within the trousseau and that such imaginings of, or predictions about, the future affect people’s actions, expectations and decisions in the present.

**Dealing with Indeterminacy: Providing a Suitable Abode**

For the Egyptians I spoke with, a home was considered a pre-requisite for marriage. My informants spoke of proposals refused, weddings postponed and engagements terminated due to a concern with the status of the marital home. In this section, I consider why homes play such a central and determining role in the timing of various stages of marriage and in perceptions of the future viability, stability and happiness of a given union. I argue that the reasons why homes feature so prominently in marital negotiations include the widely-held conviction that one’s first marital residence should be a home for life and the problematic legacy of the state’s intervention into the Egyptian property market. The prominence of homes in marriage negotiations is also shaped by the common cultural conception that a man’s capacity to provide a home helps predict his ability to act as a protective provider and the belief that excessive adjustment can place a marital relationship in jeopardy.
Two young bachelors whom I had met through friends at Mostafa Hamid cultural centre, revealed that they had each purchased a home, despite the fact that they had yet to propose to anyone. I was surprised that they had opted to marginalise any prospective affines from this key decision and was keen to find out more. So, I asked how they thought this decision would affect them in the future, if it could repel any prospective brides. They both argued that postponing the purchase of a home until one had found a suitable spouse was financially foolhardy, that any money saved for a home would rapidly depreciate in value. Such an argument makes sense given the fact that Egypt’s rate of inflation was estimated to have reached 11.1% in 2010. One of these bachelors also stated that if a prospective wife was not happy with his chosen purchase, he would sell it for a property that she would be satisfied with. They both argued that for some girls’ fathers, possession of a suitable home was a pre-requisite for the acceptance of a proposal, hence in some cases the purchase of a home must necessarily precede the proffering of a proposal.

In the course of fieldwork, I had opportunity to speak with five separate estate agents about the nature of the conjugal home and the state of the Egyptian housing market. One such agent was particularly enthusiastic about my project and spoke at length about his despair with his 24 year old daughter’s continued unmarried status. I asked him if she had ever received a proposal and he confirmed that four different bachelors had expressed an interest in marrying his daughter. However, none of these suitors possessed a home and, for this reason, he refused to proceed any further, stating they should return once they had found a suitable place to live. He was, he confessed, somewhat irritated by these tentative proposals; they were far too premature and in his view none of these suitors were in a position to marry anytime soon. He did not want his daughter to be locked into an engagement of indeterminate length, restlessly waiting for the day that her fiancé purchased a home so they could finally marry and live together.

Such a home, he argued, might never materialise. Yet, more than that, this act of waiting was, in his view, particularly risky. Long, protracted engagements frequently fail. Along with many others, he opined that the engagement period

\[^{2}\text{Seehttps://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/eg.html Accessed 26/03/12}\]
carries significant challenges. The two parties must negotiate with one another to reach a mutually agreeable consensus over various practical arrangements including the furnishing of the home and the venue of the wedding. If either party is dissatisfied with an agreement then, over time a sense of resentment can take root and the relationship might eventually dissolve. Yet more importantly, couples have to deal with the tension created by the fact that engagements are revocable commitments and broken engagements are far from uncommon. Whilst each party will generally have invested enough into the engagement for its dissolution to be damaging, they generally have not invested so much that withdrawal from this union is regarded as an entirely unfeasible option. This can create or further exacerbate feelings of uncertainty and insecurity. Such feelings are difficult to withstand over a long period of time and thus may result in the breakdown of an engagement. As mentioned in Chapter One, the breakdown of an engagement can be particularly damaging for women. A broken engagement can, in some cases, adversely affect a woman’s perceived marriageability. Later in this chapter I discuss the importance of homes to marriage in Egypt, but given that a suitable home was widely regarded as a pre-requisite for the establishment of marriage and lengthy engagements are often seen to be particularly risky, this estate agent’s decision to only consider proposals from suitors already in possession of a home makes sense. Indeed such a decision may even be seen as a manifestation of paternal protectiveness.

The sense that the acquisition of a suitable home should precede the main wedding celebration (laylat az-zifaaf) featured in another informant’s account of the process of getting married. Leila worked as a teacher at one of Cairo’s public universities. At the age of 25, one of her neighbours approached her, stating her son was keen to propose. Leila and this neighbour’s son had shared the same Arabic tutor when they were children. They had been quite friendly as children but as they grew older their relationship became more distant. This, she argued, was partially due to their busy schedules but at a more fundamental level was a consequence of the effort to maintain a ‘respectable’ persona. She reasoned that Mohammed could make a suitable partner and so, advised this neighbour to speak to her uncle. Leila’s parents had died in a car accident two years previously and so she was not able to refer them to her father. Mohammed and his mother duly visited Leila’s uncle and soon enough
the couple got engaged with the agreement that Mohammed would provide a home on a new development in a satellite community in the outskirts of Cairo known as 6th October city.

The couple had opted to sign their contract shortly after their engagement but intended to host a wedding (laylat az-zifaaf) and move in together after Mohammed had bought a home. However eighteen months after signing the contract, Mohammed still was not able to purchase a suitable home. He predicted that with his current salary, two more years would pass before he would be able to afford a suitable abode. He was growing increasingly frustrated with this situation and suggested he find work in Kuwait. By this point, Leila had become attached to and dependent upon Mohammed; she did not want to be parted from him. Her family had inherited an unused apartment from her parents and so she suggested they approach her uncle, who had been appointed the role of guardian, and renegotiate the terms of their marriage. They explained their situation and suggested they move into the vacant apartment. They presented this as an interim solution and Mohammed expressed his commitment to fully furnish the flat and to continue saving for the new apartment. Leila’s uncle was not entirely happy with this suggestion and asked for time to think. The couple had already legally married, Leila’s brother was willing to relinquish temporarily his claims to the unused apartment and Leila herself was distressed by the prospect of Mohammed migrating to Kuwait, so her uncle eventually agreed to the couple’s proposal. Thus, the terms of the two men’s agreement had been redefined. When I met Leila, she was happily married and living in the inherited apartment. Mohammed was still saving for a home in 6th October city but Leila spoke of how settled she felt in her new home. For some time the progression of Leila and Mohammed’s relationship was stalled by the fact that Mohammed had yet to provide a suitable home. Yet the moment Mohammed suggested working in Kuwait, the conviction that their first marital residence should be a permanent home provided by Mohammed and/or his family was abandoned. By abandoning this principle, Leila and Mohammed were, counter to cultural norms, able to hold a

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2 Economic migration for the purpose of saving for marriage is far from uncommon (See Brink 1991; La Towsky 1984).
wedding (laylat az-zifaaf), consummate their marriage and live together despite the fact that Mohammed had not honoured his commitment to provide a suitable home.

Leila and Mohammed were quite exceptional in this respect. In fact, a majority of my informants maintained that a couple’s first marital residence should be a home for life provided by the husband and/or his kin. The idea of beginning married life in a small one bedroom apartment with the hope that over time one would be able to acquire something that fitted with one’s long term aspirations was roundly rejected. This, I will argue, must be understood with reference to Egypt’s unstable economic past, the belief that excessive adjustment can place a marital relationship in jeopardy and the widespread importance attached to a man’s role as provider.

For many years now, social scientists have challenged modernist narratives which assert that the history of any given society is a history of linear progress in which, amongst other things, one’s standard of living, will inevitably improve over time. Indeed some people’s recent pasts are characterised by a history of sustained and seemingly irreversible decline. It is not my intention here to, once again, critique modernist portrayals of linear progress but, drawing inspiration from James Ferguson (1999), I hope to shed light upon how a lack of faith in such narratives of progress affect the lives of a specific set of peoples within a rather particular context.

When I began fieldwork in 2009, Egypt had experienced a period of quite significant economic growth, rates in 2009 were estimated to be 4.7%. Yet the fruits of this growth had not been evenly distributed (Marotta et al 2011; Shenker 2009), and according to official data many Egyptians actually experienced a decline in their material fortunes during the period from 2005-2008 (Marotta et al 2011). A familiarity with this kind of counterlinear trajectory entered into the way that a few of my informants explained their approach to planning and preparing for marriage. Indeed when I asked about the possibility of beginning married life in a small one bedroom apartment with the hope that, over time, one would be able to acquire something that fitted with one’s long term aspirations, a few of my informants observed that such an advance in one’s standard of living could not be taken for

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grant. They spoke of how property prices had risen since economic liberalisation in 1974, how, for many, real wages had fallen with Egypt’s high levels of inflation and how this had adversely affected their standard of living often making particular reference to the frequency with which their family was able to eat meat. They would ask; how could one guarantee that one would eventually inhabit a home of a given specification? Such persons did not possess an abstract faith in one’s future material progress and therefore attached greater weight to homes provided in the present than the homes a groom predicted he might be able to provide in a future that is, after all, uncertain.

It is customary for couples to move into the conjugal home either on the night of the main wedding celebration (laylat az-zifaa) or, in cases in which a couple is fortunate enough to be able to spend their early days of marriage in a hotel, shortly thereafter. It is important to note that it is rare for young Egyptians, especially women, to spend time living outside their natal home prior to marriage (see Hoodfar 1997) and thus for many young Egyptians relocation at the point of marriage is seen as much a move away from one’s natal abode as a move into a new conjugal residence. In Chapter One, I described how the process of selecting a spouse was often guided by the principle that ‘like should marry like’. I highlighted that whilst this principle is enshrined in Islamic law, nobody ever spoke about it in these terms. Instead the principle that ‘like should marry like’ was presented as a feature of conventional wisdom about kinship and I was repeatedly told that excessive adjustment to one’s spouse’s differences could compromise the well-being of the individual and place a strain on the marital relationship, which could ultimately place its durability in serious jeopardy.

It soon became apparent that a similar kind of logic determined the way that people thought about homes. Indeed the suitability of a conjugal home tends to be judged in relation to one’s natal abode - although the fact that a groom and his family are responsible for providing a home and the bride and her kin may opt to accept or reject that which is provided means particular emphasis is placed upon how the conjugal home compares with the natal residence of the bride. Many claimed that a couple was unlikely to be happy in a conjugal dwelling that was less comfortable
than their natal homes, that the imperative to adjust to a decline in standard of living would place a strain upon the marital relationship. The problem was, however, that financial pressures resulting from the former government’s economic policy meant that for many the possibility of achieving the same standard of living in one’s conjugal home as that enjoyed in one’s natal residence and thus the possibility of beginning marital life without any form of adjustment to one’s standard of living was becoming increasingly difficult. 4

In the course of fieldwork, I was repeatedly told that it was the husband’s duty to protect and provide for his wife. This, of course, has been widely documented within the literature (Al Sharmani 2010). However it is my contention that an awareness of this perceived duty is fundamental to understanding the way in which houses come to colour the cultivation of marriage in Cairo. Yet, what does it mean to provide for and protect another? A husband is duty-bound not just to provide life’s basics but to provide his wife with a standard of living similar to that which she enjoyed in her father’s home. And whilst protection takes many guises, for the purpose of this chapter, I should emphasise that the provision of a home is in and of itself seen as a form of protection, in the words of one estate agent it provides a wife with ‘security’.

It is a guardian’s responsibility to ensure that a given suitor has the inclination and ability to deliver upon these duties and here, it must be noted, the home is imbued with a particularly potent sense of predictive potential. Homes are seen to give an indication, however tentative and preliminary, of a man’s potential to provide a standard of living similar to that which the bride enjoyed in her natal home. This, I would suggest, is a product of what a home is and what it is seen to imply. A home is a major contributor to a person’s material standard of living and thus ownership of a ‘suitable’ home limits the sense of indeterminacy which surrounds a suitor’s ability to provide certain material comforts. A home is seen to imply the kind of provision a wife can expect in the future. Indeed when I asked about the possibility of accepting a one-bedroom home, a female friend told me that if a man does not provide adequately before marriage, he is unlikely to do so after marriage. Hence a failure to provide a suitable home can erode a guardian’s confidence in a given suitor. Indeed,

4 For more information on the costs of marriage in Egypt see Singerman and Ibrahim 2001.
I suspect one of the reasons why Leila’s uncle was not entirely happy with the idea of her and Mohammed moving into the inherited apartment was that Mohammed had not delivered the kind of reassurance of his ability to sufficiently protect and provide for Leila something as tangible and substantive as a ‘suitable’ home can provide. I argue that, whilst one can never know if a given suitor will adequately fulfil his obligation to protect and provide for his spouse, a proven ability to provide a permanent home of given specifications offers some sense of reassurance. Once again, however, a reduction in the value of many Egyptians’ real income combined with high rates of youth unemployment meant that, in the period in which I was undertaking fieldwork, actually delivering such reassurance was an increasingly difficult task.

Whilst my informants had good reason to maintain that one’s first marital residence should be a permanent home of ‘suitable’ condition provided by the groom and/or his kin, this key conviction most certainly contributed to the extent to which concerns about post-marital residence influenced their relationship trajectories. The influence of homes upon relational trajectories was further magnified by the state of the Egyptian housing market. During World War II, Egypt’s construction industry faced a shortage of labour and building materials. This was principally due to the large number of Egyptians employed in the British army and the impact of the war upon the transport of goods. This led to a gap between housing supply and demand which the government feared would be exploited by avaricious landlords. And so in 1941, decree 151 was passed which removed the right of landlords to evict tenants even after their lease had expired, it instead gave this right to the courts. (McCall 1988; Harik 1998) Decree 151 also ‘abrogated the right of the lessor to change the rental value stated in the lease’ (McCall 1988: 158). In this way, the position of a tenant vis-a-vis his landlord had strengthened considerably. This was further intensified, when, under Nasser’s leadership, the conditions of tenancy agreements were made heritable. These key reforms had profound consequences for landlords and tenants alike.

Tenants acquired a sense of ‘quasi-ownership’ (Mansour 2009:41) over units of property and landlords found their ability to profit from residential property was
severely restricted. They could not easily evict tenants or raise rental value, even when rental value fell way below market value. This led to a decrease in investment in the construction of new residential property for future lease, which ultimately reduced the supply of accommodation available for rental and thus reduced the accessibility of rental property for hopeful new tenants such as prospective couples. The government sought to address this problem by introducing a new law in 1996 which meant the end-date of tenancy agreements drafted after 1996 would be enforceable and that the landlord is entitled to raise the value of rent once the duration of the lease has expired.\textsuperscript{5} However, the continued discrepancy between the market value of a property and the value a landlord is legally entitled to demand for certain properties, affects tenant mobility and rates of occupancy. For leases contracted prior to 1996, a landlord’s ability to evict a tenant or raise rents remains restricted. Hence one finds many tenants paying rent which falls significantly below market value. Such tenants are often hesitant to move as this would involve contracting a lease under the less favourable conditions produced by the 1996 law and is likely to be more costly. This discrepancy between rents before 1996 and after 1996 also creates a situation in which some Egyptian parents opt to continue paying rent for a property that is temporarily underutilised with the hope that one day one of their children will marry and move into the property, thereby benefiting from the favourable terms of the lease.

Yet, how is all this relevant to my focus upon marriage? When informants complained about the difficulties associated with buying a suitable marital home, I would often ask about the possibility of rental. This question raised a number of concerns about the change in rental law. Property rented under the 1996 law was widely disregarded as suitable for post-marital residence. My informants principally spoke about the short term nature of post-1996 tenancy agreements, the landlord’s freedom to evict occupants once a lease has expired and the unsettling possibility that by the time a lease expires, the rental market might have changed considerably. These three key issues combined with a broader feeling of economic uncertainty serve to create a sense that property rented under the 1996 law does not provide the...\textsuperscript{5}\textsuperscript{5} "Rent Law Number 4" (Mansour 2009: 41)
kind of long term security many seek from a conjugal home. Indeed many informants argued that most brides’ fathers would not allow a property rented under the new law to serve as their daughter’s marital residence for precisely this reason.

So, homes intended for marriage must generally either be bought by a prospective husband and/or his family or be rented under a tenancy agreement contracted before 1996. This makes the acquisition of a suitable home harder to achieve. If suitable homes were abundant in supply and assumed to be easy to obtain then, perhaps, they would not have such a pivotal role in marital negotiations. Whilst, Egypt has since the 1990s witnessed a ‘real estate explosion’ (Mitchell 1999:28) and new rental laws have made investing in the construction of residential property for rental more commercially attractive, a number of my informants still reported that difficulties associated with the acquisition of a suitable home had affected their relational trajectories.

In 1997, Carrier and Heyman described the growth of the anthropological study of consumption championed by Mary Douglas, Daniel Miller and others as ‘ironic’ (Carrier & Heyman 1997: 356). The irony was that this growth was then and is continuing to occur at a time when consumption itself is ‘threatened’ (Carrier & Heyman 1997: 356), when phenomenon such as reduction in real income means that many people’s capacity to consume is severely compromised. Carrier and Heyman argue that such constraints upon consumption have been rather neglected by anthropologists working within this field but nevertheless require our analytic attention and suggest that ‘it might be more appropriate to write an anthropology of dis-consumption’ (Carrier & Heyman 1997: 356). The analysis contained within this section does not pretend to provide such an anthropology; it does, however, offer an account of the act of providing and being provided with a conjugal home which, in keeping with Carrier and Heyman’s advice, pays due attention to the broader macro-economic context, a context which was construed by many to be unnervingly unstable and distinctly inhospitable to those seeking to marry.

While many anthropologists have illustrated how a home can influence the relationships of its occupants (Carsten 1995; Tan 2001; Bloch 1995 Miller 2001), in this section I have illustrated that homes can come to affect the cultivation of
relatedness before cohabitation has even began. I would argue that my informants were only too aware of the fact that homes are not socially insignificant or inert, physical containers and that this awareness coupled with the belief that a given suitor’s capacity to acquire a ‘suitable’ home is, at best, uncertain explains why homes are of such considerable consequence. The very fact that homes are, as detailed earlier, seen to both predict a man’s ability to act as a protective provider and to have a determining effect upon the fate of a relationship after marriage means that a home of given specifications can act to attenuate the perceived indeterminacy of life after marriage. However, it should be noted that the rather unstable nature of Egypt’s economy means that the path towards acquiring a home is also considered to be uncertain and this perhaps explains why, for some, ownership of a home of a particular standard is seen as a pre-requisite for the proffering or acceptance of a proposal and why for others a failure to acquire ownership of a ‘suitable’ home constitutes an impasse in the progression of the marital relationship.

**Situating Social Relationships: Locating the Home**

The desirability of a home is also judged in terms of its spatial location and, as numerous authors have highlighted, the location of the marital home can affect the power dynamics within a relationship (Charsley 2005; Geertz & Geertz 1979; Altorki 1986; Raheja & Gold 1994). A number of sources combine to suggest that neolocal residence has been the prevailing norm within Cairo for, at least, the past three decades (Wikan 1989; Shorter 1989; Inhorn 1996). The location of this neolocal residence can be a source of some tension. In Chapter Two, I wrote about how conflict over the location of the marital home had, temporarily, placed Ahmed and Eman’s relationship in jeopardy. Whilst Ahmed hoped to live in a neighbourhood close to his job downtown, Eman wanted to live in her natal neighbourhood of Moneib in the outskirts of Giza. Eman viewed the location of her marital home as fundamental to her future happiness and well-being, and for this reason was hesitant to compromise. She feared that living in a different neighbourhood would distance her from her family and friends and leave her feeling isolated. She also believed her mother would play a critical role in supporting her through early motherhood and
was therefore keen to ensure that they would be living in close proximity to one another.

Various authors highlight how within South Asian communities, relocation at the point of marriage is at least ritually constructed as a point of separation or rupture between a woman and her natal kin and community (Raheja and Gold 1994; Dube 1988; Jeffery & Jeffery 1996). By contrast, in an analysis of patriarchal systems in North Africa, the Muslim Middle East and South and East Asia, Deniz Kandiyoti argues that the extent to which a woman’s relocation at the point of marriage ‘represents a total break with their own kin group varies in relation to the degree of endogamy in marriage practices and different conceptions of honor’ (Kandiyoti 1988:278). I would add that the degree to which relocation of residence at the point of marriage constitutes a rupture in the relationship between a woman and her natal kin and community is very much dependent upon that woman’s freedom and ability to visit or be visited by such persons. In this way, Eman’s insistence that the couple situate their marital home in her natal neighbourhood of Moneib may be seen as symptomatic of a desire to facilitate the act of making and receiving visits and thus ensure that closeness with her natal family and friends continues after marriage. Concern with ensuring proximity between a bride’s natal and conjugal home is far from new. Indeed, Sonbol (2005) notes that marriage contracts drafted during the Ottoman period would occasionally contain clauses which specified that the bride is entitled to live within a given distance of her family.

Whilst Eman chiefly discussed how the location of her conjugal home could impinge upon her ability to guard against social isolation and access support with child care, others spoke about the importance of the location of the conjugal home in times of marital strife. Fleeing from one’s conjugal home remains a popular and powerful form of protest against a husband’s actions (Singerman 1995; Watson 1994) and whilst Watson suggests that a woman may seek sanctuary with close female friends, one’s natal family acts as a preferred refuge. In cases in which a wife resorts to this measure, a woman’s natal family is obliged to intervene. They are expected to mediate between both parties and will only allow their kinswoman to return to her conjugal home once a satisfactory resolution has been found. In this sense, a
woman’s ability to flee to her natal home can strengthen her position within the marital relationship. However, before 1967, this was a strategy that could potentially backfire. A custom known as ‘bayt al ta’a’ or ‘house of obedience’ (Talhami 1996:116) entitled a husband to ‘call on the authorities to restore his wife to the conjugal home, where he would keep her under lock and key’ (Talhami 1996:116). In 1967 a ministerial decree was issued that ‘eliminated the possibility of legal enforcement’ (Talhami 1996:116) of this custom and in 1979 a new law was introduced which ‘substituted the penalty of loss of maintenance for the punishment of house of obedience’ (Talhami 1996:116). Following these legal reforms, the act of fleeing the conjugal home became significantly less risky yet retained its potential to act as a form of protest against poor treatment (Watson 1994). However, access to this form of protest can vary. If the distance between a wife’s conjugal and natal home is too great, she may find her ability to deploy this particular form of conflict resolution is restricted and her position within the marriage is thus potentially weakened. Once again we see that the physical location of the conjugal home is of significant social and relational consequence.

Thus far, I have considered the impact of the location of the conjugal home upon imagined marital futures with reference to conversations about neolocal residences, however, some informants also made reference to a local form of living arrangement called bayt al-a’āi’la. The word a’āi’la is frequently contrasted with the word u’sra and in recent years, ‘the term usra has become synonymous with “nuclear family” ’ (Inhorn 1996:161) and a’āi’la with extended family. And whilst in formal terms a’āi’la may only be used to refer to patrilineal kin, in everyday contexts it is often used to refer to one’s bilateral relatives (Inhorn 1996). And so the term bayt al-a’āi’la literally translates as house of the extended family and is generally used to describe a block of flats inhabited by many units of a husband’s broader kin. Each unit, that is, a married couple and unmarried children, inhabit a separate flat which generally contains its own cooking and dining facilities, although members of each separate flat may choose to eat together with varying degrees of frequency. Architecturally, there is moreover, little to distinguish the relationship between several units of a bayt al-a’āi’la from the relationship between neighbours in a block of flats. It is therefore difficult to determine whether bayt al-a’āi’la should, in a
general sense, be classified as a form of virilocal or neolocal residence and I suspect that, in practice, some bayt al-aʿāiʾla are rather more virilocal than others.

bayūt al-aʿāiʾla were particularly unpopular amongst young female informants. In fact one such informant, whom I shall call Farida, disclosed she had refused a proposal due to her unwillingness to be part of this kind of living arrangement. Farida believed that familial contact in such a building would be too intense and could compromise her independence. It is, perhaps, worth noting here that Farida’s concern with the way in which life in a bayt al-aʿāiʾla would affect her independence resonates with much of the anthropological literature dealing with post-marital residence (See for example Altorki 1986; Kandiyoti 1988). Farida was, she confessed, fearful that her in-laws would try and exercise undue influence over her family’s eating habits and, more importantly, the raising of her children. Farida was particularly scared that in this kind of environment, mother and grandmother would fight for the affection of any prospective children. Despite her fondness for the suitor in question, a young man she had become acquainted with through charity work for the disabled, she believed that life in a bayt al-aʿāiʾla would be unsustainable and therefore refused his proposal. Farida’s concerns were echoed by many other informants.

One single woman added that locating one’s marital home within a bayt al-aʿāiʾla could be particularly problematic in the case of divorce. Legally, an Egyptian wife is entitled to continue residing in the conjugal home or an alternative residence provided by the husband as long as she retains custody over the couple’s children (Zulficar 1995). This woman spoke of how her aunt had remained in her conjugal home after divorce. This home was situated within her husband’s kin’s bayt al-aʿāiʾla. The unfortunate location of this home meant this aunt encountered, and was allegedly harassed by, her former in-laws on an almost daily basis. This added to the difficulties of being divorced and served to deter her niece from ever considering moving into a bayt al-aʿāiʾla.

In Chapter One, I discussed the history behind Safaa and Youssef’s engagement. Whilst driving me home from an afternoon spent at her prospective in-laws sporting club (naadee), Safaa began to tell me about her reservations about moving into a bayt
al-aʿāiʿla. Youssef’s parents had always dreamed of building a *bayt al-aʿāiʿla*. They believed the physical proximity such a living arrangement entails would help them to continue supporting their children, maintain a deep sense of closeness with them, become actively involved in the everyday lives of their grandchildren and ultimately receive their sons’ care and support in their old age. By the time Safaa had met Youssef, Youssef’s parents had not only saved for but had in fact built and moved into a *bayt al-aʿāiʿla* in one of Cairo’s satellite communities. At the age of 25, Youssef was unable to afford to purchase a suitable home alone and his father was insistent that the couple either moved into the flat he had provided within *bayt al-aʿāiʿla* or make their own independent arrangements. Safaa was less than happy. She explained that from the age of thirteen she had lived in the United Arab Emirates whilst her mother and father worked in Dubai. She then took the bold decision of returning to Cairo alone to pursue her undergraduate studies. During this time she lived alone in the family apartment but was occasionally visited by her grandmother who lived in the apartment upstairs. Over time she had acquired a keen sense of independence and feared that she would struggle with adapting to the kind of close-knit family environment of sharing a *bayt al-aʿāiʿla* with Youssef’s parents and his brother’s family.

Safaa claimed that if anyone else had presented this proposition she would have refused this challenge. However, she was reassured by what she described as Youssef’s independent nature. She was impressed with the way that Youssef had dealt with his parents’ concerns about her Christian grandmother and the fact that he had personally financed his Masters’ level education. This, she argued, reflected Youssef’s capacity to defend his personal and her own interests in the face of family opposition. Safaa also described how her prospective father-in-law had arranged for builders to restructure their future apartment to create an open-plan kitchen-living room. He was thus seen to demonstrate a respect for and willingness to accommodate to her needs and desires. This restructuring also allowed Safaa to “appropriate” (Miller 1988: 354) the apartment for herself. Safaa and Youssef had not actively chosen a place to live but had instead been given an apartment by

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6 This kind of interior configuration is rather unusual in Egypt and has implications for the way in which the domestic space is gendered.
Youssef’s parents. This apartment was built without Safaa in mind. It therefore reflected the tastes and preferences of Safaa’s prospective mother-in-law, the building of an open plan kitchen enabled Safaa to assert agency over this space before she had even moved in. Yet beyond this, Safaa argued the intensity of her attachment to Youssef and her growing fondness for his family had persuaded her to proceed with this relationship despite the fact that this would mean living in a bayt al-a’āi’la. It is important to highlight that neither Safaa nor Youssef’s parents viewed the home as a merely physical structure devoid of social import. In fact, both parties acknowledged, in quite different ways, that the location of the home could affect the nature of one’s social relationships. For Safaa, this acknowledgement came in the form of a rather sophisticated attempt to predict her influence within a bayt al-a’āi’la, and for Youssef’s parents in the form of a conviction that establishing a bayt al-a’āi’la would influence the extent to which the provision of care and support would be continued and reciprocated after their sons’ wed. Yet it also manifest itself in the belief that accommodation within a bayt al-a’āi’la would affect the degree to which closeness could be maintained with their sons and indeed extended to the next generation after their sons’ marriages.

Preparing the Home-Maker: The Bridal Trousseau

So far, I have argued that any suggestion that the conjugal home is a mere physical container is fundamentally flawed. I have suggested that homes are neither socially inert nor insignificant but are in fact seen to play a critical role in the cultivation or relatedness between prospective affines, the maintenance of relatedness amongst cognates, and the extension of a sense of relatedness towards any offspring of a given union. In this section I consider the social import of the bridal trousseau, the contents of which are procured by the bride and/or her kin and are contained within the home. The bridal trousseau varies considerably according to taste and economic circumstance but typically includes crockery, cutlery, linen, clothes and lingerie to be worn by the bride, a stove or oven and various other cooking paraphenelia, cleaning apparatus and domestic appliances. However mundane such items might appear, in the course of fieldwork I came to realise that their significance to the lives of my
informants should not be overlooked. In this section, I demonstrate how the trousseau was seen to prepare a girl for marriage, to contribute to marital harmony, to affect the everyday domestic life of a woman after marriage and to demonstrate the concern of kin for a girl beyond the point of marriage.

In many ways the bridal trousseau may be seen to fit with Goody’s definition of the dowry. It constitutes a major ‘pre-mortem’ (Goody 1973: 1) transfer of property from the kin of the bride to the bride herself. Yet, it should be noted that it is not uncommon for brides themselves to contribute to the cost of the trousseau by purchasing various items with their own wages (Amin & Al Bassusi 2004). In such circumstances, not all of the trousseau’s contents may be considered a form of dowry. The anthropological literature offers numerous explanations for the practice of providing a dowry, including the idea that the provision of a dowry helps compensate for the drain that a supposedly unproductive woman places upon a bride-takers resources (Harrel & Dickey 1985; Comaroff 1980) and the view that a generous dowry may help to attract a desirable groom (Goody 1973; El Kholy 2002; Comaroff 1980) and can create a sense of indebtedness (El Kholy 2002). Yet in my view such literature neglects the function of the dowry in preparing a girl for her future role as wife, a function that seems particularly prominent in the Cairene context and also applies to those items of the trousseau that a bride may have provided herself.

In fact, the first part of the Arabic term for bridal trousseau, gihaaz al-earuusa, comes from the same root as the active participle ‘gaahiz’ meaning to be ready, the second part, al-earuusa, literally translates as the bride, and many of my informants stated that the items included in the trousseau helped get the bride ready for marriage. One cannot help but notice that a number of items included in the trousseau facilitate the completion of various domestic tasks. My female informants unquestioningly assumed that upon marriage they would be expected to bear responsibility for undertaking or overseeing the cooking, cleaning etc. This was an assumption shared by both women who intended to continue work after marriage and those who planned to remain at home. Hence, in the process of buying and/or talking about their trousseau, they made reference to the range of domestic tasks they either
currently imagined or had previously anticipated undertaking after marriage and would actively debate the importance and practical merits of various items from this vantage point. Thus, the process of preparing for marriage involves preparing to become an effective housekeeper and the accumulation of a trousseau was seen as an integral part of this process.

In the course of proudly showing me her bridal trousseau, one married informant, Marwa’s sister, pointed to two washing machines. One was a semi-electric washing machine with a regular sized drum and the other a children’s washing machine (ghazāla al-a’ṭāf) with a smaller drum. A ghazāla al-a’ṭāf allows a mother to do small loads of washing on a frequent basis without wasting a great deal of electricity. It is particularly useful for families whose children may not necessarily have a large wardrobe and therefore need to wear a few items regularly. Yet, what is anthropologically interesting about this issue is that Marwa’s sister was given a ghazāla al-a’ṭāf by her mother as part of her bridal trousseau. It seems that in her case, preparing for marriage was also about preparing for motherhood, by preparing for one of the domestic tasks associated with children e.g. washing their clothing.

It is not uncommon for Cairenes to begin such preparations at a very young age. Despite widespread concern about Egypt’s purported ‘marriage crisis’ (azmat al-gawaaaz), there remained a widespread assumption that marriage was a normative feature of a woman’s life course. Hence, investing in a trousseau prior to engagement was not seen as remotely presumptuous. The potential role of the trousseau in inculcating and reinforcing women’s expectations of, and desire for, marriage was vividly illustrated by one informant’s childhood experiences. Shymaa recalled how, at the age of eight years, one of her school friends showed her a set of coffee cups her mother had bought her. At first, Shymaa could not understand what her friend would do with these cups. Then, her friend remarked that she needed to wrap them carefully as her mother had bought them for her for when she gets married. With time, more of Shymaa’s friends began to speak of their expanding trousseaus. These girls’ mothers were preparing their daughters for marriage and in sharing this with them conveyed the expectation that they will one day become wives. In this instance, the articulation of this expectation was accompanied by the acquisition of things,
things that could be boasted about, that were seen to indicate a move towards adulthood and that conferred status amongst one’s peers. I would argue that the fact that these girls associated accumulation of the trousseau with a move towards adulthood is no mere coincidence. Whilst in some domains adulthood is defined with reference to one’s age, one’s status as a female adult is, in Egypt, more commonly determined by one’s marital status. Hence an advance in one’s material readiness for marriage was seen as a step towards womanhood.

Shymaa recalls persistently pestering her mother to start buying her trousseau, but her parents insisted that she wait until she got engaged. They did not want to clutter up the house with such items and feared that her tastes would change and that some items might depreciate in value. Yet, Shymaa remembers being desperately jealous of friends who had already begun to prepare their trousseau. One such friend asked Shymaa why she had not begun preparing hers, enquiring if her mother did not want her to marry. When sharing this with me, Shymaa laughed, but disclosed how, at that time she was genuinely distressed and began to speculate that the ‘real reason’ her parents had failed to begin the trousseau was because they feared losing her, as she was their only daughter. I am pleased to report that Shymaa’s childhood fears prove to be unfounded; at twenty-four she is now engaged and with her mother’s assistance is busily preparing her trousseau. Yet one should not forget that when Shymaa was a child her mother’s failure to begin a trousseau had caused genuine distress. Lambek and Antze (1996) assert that one’s imagined future can shape the construction of one’s current identity. The accumulation of the trousseau lent weight to, and provided a stimulus for, articulating and further elaborating an imagined future as a married woman. It thus contributed to a number of Shymaa’s friends’ construction of themselves as future wives. As much as Shymaa hoped to become a wife, the fact that she had not begun a trousseau meant she was unable to assert this identity for herself as confidently as her peers; she was therefore left feeling distressed and marginalised.

Shymaa’s peers were not alone in preparing a trousseau far in advance of actual marriage. Indeed for many women, the preparation of a trousseau was a highly strategic long-term process of accumulation which served to strengthen bonds
between mothers and daughters. These women claimed that the preparation of the trousseau was a costly, time-consuming and strenuous process. Hence preparing early meant one was not overwhelmed by the cost and labour involved in completing such a task. Starting a trousseau early also meant one was able to take time to gather information and strategically plan what items to buy and when and where to buy them.

Many women specified the order in which they procured certain items of the trousseau and were keenly aware of the appreciating and depreciating value of various objects. Hence many stated that their mothers purposefully chose to buy electric items such as washing machines and blenders later on because such items were seen as particularly likely to become outmoded and depreciate in value over time. Other items, such as metal serving trays were bought earlier on as it was assumed that such commodities would appreciate in value, hence buying such items could save money later on. Given Egypt’s high rate of inflation, these strategies are considered particularly worthwhile.

It is important to note that the act of shopping for the trousseau tends to be undertaken by mothers and daughters. In an ethnographic study of divorce in the UK, Bob Simpson describes the transition from junior to senior school as an ‘important rite of passage in British Society’ (Simpson 1998: 105) and claims the act of ‘kitting out’ (Simpson 1998: 105) a child with stationery, school uniform and sportswear ‘makes important public and private statements about kin concern’ (Simpson 1998: 105). In a similar vein, I would suggest that the act of endowing a bride with an adequate trousseau ‘makes important public and private statements’ (Simpson 1998: 105) about parental, and more specifically, maternal concern for a daughter’s well-being beyond the point of marriage. This is perhaps best illustrated by Marwa’s sister’s comments about a neighbour who was, in her view, provided with a substandard trousseau. She criticised her neighbour’s mother for not taking greater effort to provide for her daughter and argued that this mother’s failure to ensure that a mixer was included in her daughter’s trousseau was evidence of a more general indifference to her welfare. She asserted that this mother had not properly equipped her daughter for one of the key challenges associated with becoming a wife, the
preparation of food. This, she stated, could adversely affect her everyday life in her new marital home and thus this mother had neglected her maternal duties.

The sense that the content of one’s trousseau could affect one’s marital welfare was reiterated by Shymaa. Shymaa and her family’s frantic quest to get her trousseau ready before she got married was a source of endless conversation. Whenever we met, I would ask what she had last purchased. During one such encounter, Shymaa showed me a bag full of Tupperware and, much to my surprise, another bag full of tissues. I jokingly enquired if her fiancé suffered from hay fever, to which she admitted she might have gone a little overboard but that these tissues would be used over a long period of time. She explained that whilst some brides’ trousseaus include a select number of important items, she had tried to include everything, great or small, that she might need in her new home. She had seen her own parents argue over finances and did not want to burden her prospective husband with too many material demands in the early days of their marriage. Whilst she had faith in her fiancé’s generous nature, she appreciated that the transition from single to married life was going to be a challenge. Whereas previously, in his natal home, everything was provided, he would now have to take responsibility for paying for food, electricity etc. This could place a strain upon him as a person and upon their relationship together. Hence, Shymaa had decided to stock up on various household items which could ultimately help ease her fiancé’s adjustment to the pressures of providing for an independent household.

The belief that the content of the marital trousseau could have an impact upon the quality of one’s life after marriage was repeated, albeit in a rather different fashion, by Marwa. As mentioned in Chapter Three, when I very first met Marwa she had already endured one failed engagement and was due to marry a Libyan police officer, a marriage that never came to fruition. One afternoon, Marwa confessed that the previous day her first fiancé had called and told her he still loved her. Unsure of how to react, I asked her how she had responded. She had told him never to call again. I then asked why their engagement had broken down. She explained that throughout their engagement she had been saving up for and preparing a trousseau. Her parents had died, so whilst her brothers and sisters bought her various items as gifts she felt
primarily responsible for this task. Marwa had predicted that her trousseau would be ready in time for her to marry in June, but her fiancé hoped to marry in April. They repeatedly argued over this issue but she was determined that she would not marry until she had completed her trousseau. She explained she was saving up for, amongst other things, a semi-electric washing machine and was not willing to embark upon marital life without such items. This lack of willingness was compounded by the fact that she would not be working after marriage and was uncertain if her husband would save for a washing machine with the same sense of purpose that she had exhibited. She worried that if she agreed to marriage prior to the completion of her trousseau, a significant amount of time would lapse before she would obtain this key appliance.

Yet, why did she consider such items to be so crucial? Marwa stated that she was concerned what people might say, that a substandard trousseau could attract unkind comments. She added, that in her view, a semi-electric washing machine would make her everyday life after marriage a lot easier. She found washing clothes by hand tedious and tiring and could not abide the idea of spending her married life at home, washing clothes in this fashion. She believed that undertaking such a chore would leave her tired, bored and unhappy and that this would inevitably harm her marriage. It is important to note here, that Marwa did not assert that a washing machine would increase the amount of leisure time available to her, a view that Cowan (1983) found was particularly prevalent amongst American housewives, but simply argued that a washing machine would relieve her of the drudgery of washing clothes by hand. It is difficult to determine precisely when semi-electric or indeed fully electric washing machines entered into Egyptian trousseaus but El Kholy suggests that demand for such goods began to grow with economic liberalisation and with the ‘boom in labour migration to the Gulf’ in the 1980s (El K holy 2002: 127). And while El Kholy (2002) considers the increasing inclusion of domestic appliances in Egyptian bridal trousseaus purely in terms of the status such goods can confer upon their owner, I would argue that the bridal trousseau is not simply a form of symbolic capital but is also construed to have a more practical function. It seems to me that El Kholy’s single-minded focus upon domestic appliances capacity to confer status upon the owner is the product of an omission to explore these items practical utility rather than a positive assertion that these items have only symbolic value for their owners. In a
fascinating contrasting analysis of money, commodities and consumption within a Sri Lankan fishing village, Stirrat describes how in the 1970s villagers without electricity began to purchase televisions. Such purchases, he argued, were motivated by the status such items could confer upon the buyer rather than their practical utility. Indeed such villagers were unable to put these televisions to practical use (Stirratt 1989). And so, whilst I acknowledge that in certain contexts consumer durables may serve solely to confer status, this was not the case in the aforementioned example.

As the name suggests, the trousseau is seen to prepare a woman for the challenges associated with being a wife. It prepares a woman for her new role as housekeeper and in some cases as prospective mother. An awareness of the practical utility of various items of the trousseau and their perceived impact upon quotidian domestic life is key to understanding Marwa’s decision to delay marriage until her trousseau was complete.

This delay ultimately led to the termination of her engagement, Marwa’s fiancé had grown so frustrated with the length of their engagement that he delivered an ultimatum. Either they got married in April or they did not marry at all. Marwa opted to end their relationship. I asked if she ever regretted this decision; she replied that by making this ultimatum, he had shown the true extent of his commitment to her, he was not prepared to wait an extra two months for her. Her sister however did not believe that he would have actually carried through with his threat and ended the engagement if they did not marry in April, but felt that his actions were particularly cruel and cast his suitability as a prospective husband into question. Both Marwa and her sister’s comments serve to reinforce the notion that the engagement period is a constant audition, that the decision to marry another is never completely irrevocable but always provisional. Indeed the decision to marry tends to be considered with reference to the kinds of information about one’s future circumstances and prospective affines accumulated during this period and how this impinges upon one’s prognosis of one’s future happiness within, and the durability of, a proposed relationship. The timing of Marwa’s marriage was initially conditional upon her access to a well-equipped home, yet ultimately her decision to terminate her engagement was based upon the actions of her fiancé, which caused her to doubt his
commitment and eventually led her to reassess the likely happiness and durability of their forthcoming marriage.

Whilst Marwa struggled with the incomplete existence of a trousseau and an all-too-present fiancé, another informant struggled with the presence of a trousseau and the troubling absence of a fiancé. At the age of twenty-eight, Nermine’s continued single status was a source of kin concern. Nermine’s mother had introduced her to a couple of seemingly eligible bachelors but neither of these men had expressed any interest in making further acquaintance with her. This, her mother surmised, was due to Nermine’s outspoken nature. However, unbeknownst to her parents, Nermine had attracted the interest of three different suitors, one of whom, as described in Chapter One, had in her view exaggerated the extent of his religiousness; another of whom she considered to be of a different socio-economic background to her family; and a final suitor who in her estimation was not sincere. Nermine and her mother frequently bickered and occasionally her mother would allude to her disappointment at her daughter’s continued single status. Nermine found this difficult to bear.

One evening, I met up with Nermine to find her looking particularly downbeat. I asked if everything was alright, to which she responded that her cousin was getting married. She had already mentioned the issues she had with her mother and so I asked how her mother had responded. Her mother had not said anything to her but had instead noisily taken Nermine’s trousseau out of her closet and began furiously dusting. She then asked Nermine to help her return the items to the closet. Nermine knew her mother was trying to provoke an argument and so had to force herself to suppress her anger and do as her mother asked. When recalling this incident, she remained angry. She was upset that her mother had not been more sensitive to her feelings. She had always expected to be married before her cousin, who was four years younger than her. And as much as she wished her cousin well, her engagement had unsettled her. Life had not turned out the way she expected it to. She and her family had always imagined that she would marry. Whilst this remained a possibility, it no longer seemed inevitable. Nermine never said this but it seems their former abstract expectation of marriage was reified in Nermine’s trousseau and this perhaps, explains why her mother’s actions were so hurtful. Nermine confessed to me that she
feared that her trousseau might remain unused in the closet but then quickly added in a resigned tone, ‘praise be to God’.

**Conclusion**

At the beginning of this chapter I stated that while many anthropologists have demonstrated how a house can come to mould and influence the relationships of its occupants (Carsten 1995; Tan 2001; Bloch 1995; Miller 2001), I consider how houses can come to affect the cultivation of relatedness before cohabitation has even begun. This notion that persons and things do not occupy ‘distinct ontological zones’ is also presented by Bruno Latour (1993: 10) and is of particular pertinence to the ways in which my informants spoke of houses, trousseaus and life after matrimony. So too, is Latour’s notion that the idea that persons and things interact in ways that are mutually constitutive is rather more ‘thinkable’ in some settings than in others. I would suggest that for many Cairenes the notion that persons and things do not occupy separate ontological realms and can instead shape one another in a mutually constitutive fashion is in fact very ‘thinkable’ and that this has implications for the ways in which marriages are prepared for and proposed unions are perceived, indeed this contributes to the prominence of and determining effect of ‘things’ such as houses upon marital negotiations. The thinkability of such a relationship between persons and things in Cairo enters into the way that, as described above, things such as houses and washing machines come to mediate and condition the manner in which conjugal futures are imagined and such imaginings of or predictions about the future affect people’s actions, expectations and decisions in the present.

I thus propose that it is, perhaps, useful here to think of marriage not as a joining of persons or groups of persons but as a process of expanding networks of persons and things. On one level, this allows for a more sensitive and sympathetic analysis of Egypt’s purported marriage crisis. Yet on a slightly more theoretical level, conceptualising marriage in this way means we are better able to exploit what Carsten describes as the ‘suggestive possibilities’ (Carsten 2000a: 31) of Latour’s work for ‘the future of the study of kinship’ (Carsten 2000a: 31) which, as Carsten
notes, allows for a more holistic analysis which is neither distorted nor constricted by the view that persons and things occupy ‘entirely distinct ontological zones’ (Latour 1993: 10).
5 Of Being Caught Between Two Fires: The Registration of Islamic Marriage in Cairo

Throughout this thesis I have argued that the cultivation of marriage is, for many Cairene Muslims, a process with uncertain consequences. Whilst most hope that their efforts to forge an alliance will result in the creation of a durable and satisfying union, they recognise that such efforts might lead to divorce, marital misery, economic hardship and/or loss of reputation. In this chapter, I consider how these unsettling possibilities affect the registration of marriage.

In the first section, I reflect upon the timing of the registration of marriage amongst Cairene Muslims. I consider how the scheduling of this key event is shaped by material circumstance and by a concern with the vulnerability of prospective affines and the propriety of their conduct. Drawing upon Michael Lambek’s (2010) work on the impact of ritual upon ethical evaluation, I explore the ways in which the performance of katb al-kitāb comes to affect the perceived propriety of a couple’s subsequent conduct and the forms of freedom and constraint it might thereby produce. In the second section, I provide a detailed description of the contract-writing ceremony. In so doing, I draw attention to some of the ways in which this key rite serves to encompass and perpetuate particular ideas about marriage including the accommodation of the fact that marriage is believed to be a terminable bond. In the third section, I provide a detailed analysis of the marriage contract. I assert that this document provides prospective affines with a means of partially protecting themselves from hardship but that its protective function is not always utilised and is, in certain respects, being eroded. Ultimately I suggest that the registration of marriage serves to highlight the vulnerability of prospective spouses in Cairo. I argue that whilst registration might serve to attenuate some of the risks associated with seeking, becoming and being married, it also serves to produce new kinds of risk. And in this way, persons in the process of becoming married in Cairo often find themselves caught ‘between two fires’ (bayn naarayn).
They have written their contract: The timing of registration and the propriety and vulnerability of affines

In the course of fieldwork, I swiftly learnt that the scheduling of the registration of marriage was not always determined by material and logistical circumstance. Instead, such scheduling was often greatly influenced by the way in which notions of propriety and perceptions of vulnerability are coloured by emic definitions of matrimony. In most legal contexts, a couple is conceived to be married the moment they have registered their union. In more everyday contexts, however, a couple who have registered their union are acknowledged to have ‘signed their contract’ but are not considered to be fully married until they have celebrated laylat az-zifaaf (night of the wedding band), consummated their relationship and begun cohabiting. In this section, I describe how such distinctions in relational status influence the way that the propriety of a couple’s conduct is judged and how this, in turn, can affect the progression of a relationship. I also argue that the distinction between engagement, legal marriage and social marriage plays an important role in assessing the eligibility of a prospective spouse and in calculating the risks associated with dissolving a relationship.

The sense that notions of propriety, feelings of vulnerability and logistical issues can combine to influence the timing of the registration of marriage was illustrated by the experiences of a married university teacher, Leila. In the previous chapter I described how the difficulties Leila’s partner experienced in obtaining a suitable marital abode had served to obstruct the progression of their relationship. I commented that Leila and Mohammed’s families had agreed that they would contract a marriage with the understanding that the couple would celebrate laylat az-zifaaf (night of the wedding band), consummate their union and move in together as soon as Mohammed (and his kin) had provided a suitable conjugal home, an agreement that, as described in Chapter Four, was eventually renegotiated.

Yet, why had they opted to stagger their relationship in this way? Leila explained that she and Mohammed had been engaged for three months prior to their legal
marriage. Yet the extent to which they could become acquainted with one another was, during this time, greatly restricted by both personal and broader familial and peer definitions of proper conduct. During their engagement, Leila and Mohammed were only permitted to meet within the confines of Leila’s natal home. Moreover, Mohammed was not permitted to visit Leila in the absence of her brother and thus they rarely had the opportunity to meet more than once a week. Their families acknowledged that this kind of arrangement was difficult to sustain over the long-term but were concerned that greater leniency in this regard would be construed negatively and would attract critical comments; comments and judgements which, it must be noted, would disproportionately harm Leila. Yet at the same time, their families were aware that it would take at least a year for Mohammed and his kin to purchase a ‘suitable’ home. They thus found themselves in something of a quandary.

In common with many others, Leila and Mohammed decided to deal with this dilemma by exploiting the aforementioned distinction between the legal and social recognition of marriage. This decision played a pivotal role in determining the perceived viability and progression of their relationship. In this thesis I have already described the sense of ambivalence which surrounds lengthy engagements. On the one hand, a protracted engagement provides both parties with the opportunity to become further acquainted with one another prior to making any further commitment and was thus viewed in a positive light. Yet on the other hand, the various practical and emotional trials associated with being engaged in Egypt mean that an excessively long betrothal is seen as particularly risky.

Whilst other informants had spoken about conflicts over practical arrangements and the way that over time feelings of insecurity and uncertainty could take root, Leila added that protracted engagements ran the risk of becoming ‘boring’ and were thereby prone to failure. This view was, perhaps, influenced by the strict conditions placed upon her interactions with her fiancé over the engagement period. Indeed, Leila spoke with much animation about the difference between her relationship with her fiancé before and after the registration of their relationship. She described how, after the contract-writing ceremony (katb al-kitāb), the couple’s opportunities to become acquainted with one another instantly expanded. The couple were able to
engage in activities that would not have been possible prior to the contract-writing ceremony. Such activities included speaking on the phone and going out alone in public to coffee shops, parks and other ‘respectable’ locations, yet quite pointedly excluded acts of physical intimacy.

In other words, activities which were considered improper before the legal marriage became proper after the contract-writing ceremony. Thus even though many would not perceive the couple to be quite married, the contract-writing ceremony had brought about a qualitative shift in the definition of their relationship. This redefinition of their relationship was accompanied by a shift in the way that their conduct was interpreted. In this way, the writing of the contract allowed the couple to expand the nature of their acquaintanceship in a manner that did not trouble their moral consciences and that could be defended in the face of potential critique.

Yet in the process of writing their contract, the couple exposed themselves to further peril. The couple were no longer simply engaged, but were now legally married. As such, legal divorce and the harmful effects it can have upon one’s future eligibility became a possibility. Whilst it is acknowledged that the divorce of someone who is married in merely legal terms is different to that of someone who is married in its complete sense, the impact of a divorce upon one’s perceived eligibility is qualitatively different to and far greater than a broken engagement. Even though the couple might not have consummated their marriage nor indeed lived together, they are officially classified as divorced. This has particularly negative implications for a woman’s marriageability but also has an impact upon the perceived eligibility of a man. Unfortunately, I never had the opportunity to meet Leila’s uncle but I do strongly suspect the new kinds of vulnerability created by the contracting of legal marriage adversely affected his ability to insist that Leila’s husband kept true to their original agreement, and that this played a role in his eventual willingness to abandon his commitment to the principle that the couple’s first marital residence should be a permanent home of suitable standard provided by Mohammed’s affines.

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1 Such implications are related to gendered notions of purity described in Chapter One.
The sense that one’s relational status can compromise one’s eligibility was clearly illustrated in a conversation with a young female friend. At the time I met Shymaa, she had already been engaged for a few months. In the course of telling me about her current union, she mentioned that she had previously refused a number of suitors. When I began to ask Shymaa about these suitors she mentioned a young accountant who had legally married his former fiancée only to initiate divorce. He had divorced this fiancée just a week before they were due to move in together. Shymaa paid particular attention to the dissolution of this relationship. She argued the fact that the couple had completed the contract, booked a venue and sent out invitations and then their marriage was terminated was suggestive of some sort of ‘crisis’.

Her parents had questioned the suitor’s family and a couple of their mutual acquaintances about this issue but all concerned would simply state that new information about the bride’s family had forced them to reconsider. Shymaa and her family never found out what this information was; they thus surmised that the suitor in question was either incredibly reckless or some kind of scandal had prompted the end of this relationship at this unusually late stage. In either case, the suitor’s eligibility was cast into question.

I asked Shymaa if her response would have been the same if this particular suitor had dissolved his union with his former fiancée at an earlier date, say before sending out the wedding invitations. Shymaa claimed that such circumstances would make his relational past less suspect but that she would have refused this suitor anyway. As an unmarried woman (al-‘aānisa), marriage to a man who is divorced, albeit only on paper, is a less than favoured option. People expect her to marry someone of identical marital status to herself and a failure to conform to these expectations would spark considerable speculation about her own desirability. She would therefore suffer a loss in reputation. Thus even though this suitor had not completed his marriage, the fact that he had previously been legally married, served to compromise his perceived eligibility.

Yet despite such risks, some continue to sign their contract far in advance of the completion of their marriage. Indeed, whilst sitting in the university courtyard, sheltering from the intense September sun and waiting for the screening of a film, I
began speaking to a young Egyptian couple. They asked me what I was doing in Egypt and so I told them about my project. At this point the couple grew very animated and invited me to pull over my wicker chair and chat to them. They commented that they had recently completed their contract and were due to marry in November. In actual fact this couple had celebrated katb al-kitāb in mid-July. When I asked them why they had spread out their marriage in this way, they provided an interesting explanation. They predicted that the furnishing and decorating of their home would not be complete before November but had been engaged for a number of months and were keen to spend time over Ramadan together. More specifically, they were keen to break the fast with one another’s families and to join the throngs of young couples who promenade beside the Nile during the evenings. It must be noted that walking along the Nile is viewed as a particularly romantic pastime and the quantity of people who engage in this activity visibly swells during Ramadan. However, the couple claimed that if they had remained mere fiancé and fiancée the pursuit of these two key desires could have been accompanied by difficulties.

In Egypt, the breaking of the fast during Ramadan can be a particularly joyful and sociable affair. Families often invite guests to join them in this festivity. Such gatherings are often lengthy in duration and those present will only begin to eat when the sun has set and the call to prayer has sounded. As such, persons who join such occasions will not leave until late into the night. For betrothed couples, such late-night encounters can, in certain neighbourhoods and amongst particular circles, provoke controversy. Indeed Ahmed and Eman expressed the concern that if they stayed at one another’s homes to break the fast, they might be the target of gossip. The signing of the contract, then, helped protect them from such attacks. If anyone criticised them for staying out so late together they could easily argue that they were legally married and thus their behaviour was entirely legitimate. They also worried that policemen and security officers would hassle them for spending time alone in public. Whilst their proposed promenades along the Nile were perfectly permissible, their unmarried state left them vulnerable to the harassment of overzealous policemen. Indeed, I had heard many a story about couples who had been aggressively questioned by police officers whilst walking along the corniche and whilst journeying to Red Sea resorts. I had also personally witnessed a couple get
severely reprimanded for getting a little too close in a movie theatre. Informants would describe such encounters with the police as infuriating and embarrassing. In order to avoid this sort of drama, this particular couple had chosen to sign their contract before they began going out unchaperoned. Ahmed produced his marriage contract from his wallet and commented that he in fact stored this vital paper there lest the couple receive any unwarranted attention. For this couple, then, the decision to perform *katb al-kitāb* (the writing of the contract) in advance of the celebration of *laylat az-zifaaft* was principally motivated by a desire to eschew the negative consequences of external regulation and policing of their interpersonal conduct.

This sense that the signing of the marriage contract can expand one’s freedom to interact with a prospective spouse similarly features in an account provided by a young Egyptian wife whom I have called Nariman. As mentioned in Chapter Three, Nariman had previously terminated an engagement with her husband-to-be due to a concern about his maturity and his dependability as a husband and father. Yet, over a year later, Hassan proposed once again and Nariman accepted. A belief that Hassan had matured and a renewed sense of appreciation for his qualities had played an important part in Nariman’s decision. In the time between the termination of their initial engagement and Hassan’s second proposal, Nariman had witnessed a friend forced to deal with an opinionated, controlling and self-righteous fiancé and she was hugely grateful that Hassan did not in her view possess any of these characteristics. Yet more than that she came to value his unwavering loyalty towards her and had come to believe that Hassan had grown up. By this point he had graduated and during this second betrothal, he spoke with much focus about his future career plans and displayed a much greater level of decisiveness. So, Nariman accepted his proposal and the couple’s families began to prepare for marriage.

Nariman completed her contract with Hassan shortly after accepting his proposal. Yet the *katb al-kitāb* preceded the *laylat az-zifaaft* by ten months. When I asked her why they had scheduled the celebrations in this way, Nariman joked, so that her husband could ‘trap’ her. Whilst this comment was said in jest, one cannot help but wonder whether the decision to contract the marriage at this early date was influenced by a fear on Hassan’s part that their relationship would be dissolved once
again. Nariman also noted that scheduling the celebration in this way provided them with greater flexibility in conduct. Whilst Nariman worked during the day, Hassan worked mainly in the evenings. These uncomplementary work schedules meant that they often met late at night. Nariman commented that if they had not been already legally married, such meetings would have inspired the gossip of their neighbours and would thus have adversely affected their reputations. Once again, we see that the threat of gossip can influence and regulate the way that couples organise their relationships. These gossiping neighbours were blissfully unaware that now Nariman had signed her contract she felt entitled, not only to visit her husband late at night, but also to consummate her relationship with him. These neighbours were ultimately unable to see and therefore censor this key act.

Whilst Nariman’s decision to consummate her union prior to laylat ad-duxla does deviate from mainstream norms, she is not alone in her evaluation of such conduct as religiously permissible. Indeed another informant, whom I shall call Dina described how the existence of dissent about this topic had shaped her own experience of getting married. Dina stated that her katb al-kitāb took place just a week before the laylat az-zifaaf. When I asked why she had elected to time the celebrations in this way, Dina commented that her parents had in fact stated a preference for holding the katb al-kitāb just a day before the actual wedding but this was deemed to be logistically impossible. And so, the contract-writing ceremony took place just a week before the actual wedding. Her parents desire to hold the katb al-kitāb so close to the wedding was due to the fact that some young people now feel justified in having a ‘full relationship’ after signing the contract. Her parents strongly disapproved of this practice and did not want their daughter to be under the temptation to consummate her marriage prematurely. And so the week between the katb al-kitāb and the laylat az-zifaaf her mother gave her a ‘really hard time’ and would not ‘let her out her sight’. Whenever she went to her future home to supervise workmen her mother would insist upon joining her. For Dina a concern with propriety had in a manner quite different to the others discussed in this chapter shaped the timing of the various stages of marriage.
In a recent essay entitled *Toward an Ethics of the Act*, Michael Lambek (2010) ponders the impact of ritual upon ethical evaluation. Following Rappaport (1999), Lambek asserts that the process of undertaking a ritual can act to clarify or indeed reclassify the performer’s public status, and that this has implications for the way in which the morality of the performer’s subsequent actions are judged by the performer herself and by others. Whereas some actions may be seen as intrinsically ethical or unethical, the morality of other action is determined with reference to one’s public status. Moral conduct is, then, at least in part, about behaving in a manner that befits one’s public status. Yet, as Lambek points out, ritual can transform one’s public status and therefore serves to ‘recalibrate the criteria and shift the ethical context’ (Lambek 2010: 56) in which one’s actions are interpreted by oneself and by others. And for this reason, an action that may have been deemed ethical before a given ritual status was achieved may become unethical after that status has been acquired and vice versa.

This sense that ritual status may have a bearing upon the ethical evaluation of one’s conduct is evident in many of the relational trajectories cited within this section. Indeed, in many of these trajectories the shift in public, ritual and legal status engendered by the contract-writing ceremony was perceived to expand one’s ability to become better acquainted with a prospective spouse in a socially and morally acceptable fashion. Activities that may have been deemed improper or potentially controversial before the performance of *katb al-kitāb* came to be seen as proper and relatively uncontroversial after the writing of the contract. Thus, drawing inspiration from Lambek and Rappaport, I would argue that the performance of *katb al-kitāb* brings forth a change in the ‘ethical context’ (Lambek 2010: 56) and in the ‘criteria’ (Lambek 2010: 56) by which the performers’ subsequent actions are judged and thereby produces new kinds of freedom and constraint.

Lambek also asserts that the content of the evaluative criteria established through ritual is ‘definitive’ (Lambek 2010: 46) in nature. Yet I would suggest that this is not always the case. Indeed in the course of fieldwork I encountered a diversity of opinion about what a couple who are merely engaged can and cannot legitimately do and the kinds of intimacy which a couple who have performed *katb al-kitāb* but were
yet to perform *laylat az-zifaaf* could feasibly forge. Some believed that it was perfectly respectable for an engaged couple to go out in public together without a chaperone, yet others believed that engaging in this kind of activity at this stage in one’s relationship was morally questionable. Whereas some believed that it was perfectly acceptable for a couple to consummate their union after performing *katb al-kitāb* but before celebrating *laylat az-zifaaf*, others believed that consummating one’s relationship at this stage was fundamentally wrong. In both these cases we see that the criteria by which a person of a given ritual status is held to account is open to debate.

Yet in spite of this, I still agree with Lambek’s overriding claim that ritual plays a role in delineating zones of freedom and constraint. Whereas rituals such as *katb al-kitāb* do not ‘control behaviour directly’ (Rappaport 1999: 123), they do influence the way in which one’s conduct and indeed one’s past is interpreted by others. Ritual can thereby effect an increase or decrease in the risk that one’s actions will be subject to social censorship. Within the context of the cultivation of Islamic marriage in Cairo, social censorship may take the form of extended exchanges with overzealous policemen but more often manifests itself in the wagging tongues of not-so-idle gossips. By recalibrating the criteria by which the propriety of a couple’s actions is judged, the performance of *katb al-kitāb* is seen to partially protect couples who wish to, for example, visit one another late at night or go out together in the absence of a chaperone from such kinds of social censorship. This shift in ethical context and criteria and the various freedoms and protections thereby produced motivates some couples to perform *katb al-kitāb* sooner rather than later.

It is interesting to note here that gossip and fear of gossip can both influence and, to a certain extent, regulate the way in which prospective affines organise their relationship. Thus in accordance with Gluckman and others, I would suggest that gossip is anything but idle. It is in fact a hugely potent yet greatly underestimated social force (Gluckman 1963; Paine 1967; Pietila 2007; Solove 2007). To return to my main argument, the performance of *katb al-kitāb* generates certain kinds of freedom and protection. Yet, it also creates new kinds of vulnerability and constraint. Once *katb al-kitāb* has been performed, legal divorce and the harmful effects this can
have upon one’s future eligibility becomes a possibility. This means that both parties
are exposed to a new kind of risk. Yet it also means that the act of withdrawing from
the relationship is somewhat trickier and is likely to be of greater detriment to both
parties’ future eligibility than had the couple remained simply engaged. It is
therefore, perhaps, little surprise that one informant, Nariman, had joked that the
signing of the contract had enabled her husband to ‘trap’ her.

The contract-writing ceremony

Whereas a great deal has been written about law, marriage and Islam within the
Middle East (see for example Hasso 2011; Shaham 1999; Sonbol; 2005; El-Alami
1992), surprisingly little has been written about the nature of the contract-writing
ceremony itself. So, whilst in the previous section I described the timing of the
contract-writing ceremony, in this section I describe the contract-writing ceremony
itself and highlight how this key event incorporates and perpetuates particular ideas
about marriage. This description is based principally upon first-hand observation of
contract-writing ceremonies at mushykat al-a’zhar but is also informed by
representations provided by registrars, personal accounts offered by married
informants and attendance at a street wedding in which the katb al-kitāb and laylat
az-zifaaf were combined to form a single event.

Whilst undertaking fieldwork I was repeatedly surprised by the sheer diversity of
venues in which an Islamic marriage contract signing ceremony could occur. The
location of this key event was, it seemed, not very tightly regulated by the state.
Typical katb al-kitāb venues included the natal home of the bride, the function hall of
a mosque, the office of a registrar, the location of laylat az-zifaaf – be it a hotel
banqueting suite or a small neighbourhood street- and mushykat al-a’zhar.

In addition to being a key centre for religious learning, mushykat al-a’zhar is a
particularly popular and prestigious venue for the writing of one’s contract. It houses
three wedding halls reserved solely for this purpose, and registrars are employed in
shifts to help officiate ceremonies. One of these registrars was particularly keen for
me to witness a contract-writing ceremony and so, after speaking to the couple in
question, invited me to observe him solemnise a union. He subsequently arranged for
me to spend a couple of evenings observing contract-writing ceremonies within
mushykat al-a‘zhar. One of the most striking things about mushykat al-a‘zhar was
the sheer volume of marriage contracts officiated each day. The corridors and
elevators leading up to the three ceremonial halls were often crammed with guests
and the sound of ululation was never far away. On Thursday and Friday evenings
these halls were a veritable hive of activity. Fortunately, these halls had been
equipped to deal with such volumes and a system has been developed to ensure the
efficiency of this process. Whilst the three halls varied in size, they each contained a
raised platform topped with a long wooden table and a row of seats. During the
ceremony, the bride and groom, bride’s guardian, witnesses and registrar were seated
at the table to complete the contract. Guests were seated in fold-up, cinema-style
seats facing this table. Halls were booked for forty minute stints, at the end of which
an announcement was broadcast from loudspeakers asking wedding parties to vacate
the hall. At this point the wedding party filtered out of the room through a wide door.
They would then noisily proceed either to a reception room or to the central car park.
Here, the guests would congratulate the bride and groom and mingle with other
members of the party before either returning home or moving on to further
celebrations. A tag team of cleaners would swiftly enter the hall and purge it of any
sweet wrappers or other detritus left by the previous wedding party. Shortly
thereafter, a new wedding party would enter. The rapid turnaround of these contract-
writing ceremonies was both exhilarating and exhausting. Whilst at times I was
overwhelmed by the extent of activity within these halls, my time in mushykat al-
a‘zhar most certainly enhanced my knowledge of the contract-writing process.

Every contract-writing ceremony begins with a recital of the fatḥa. This is led by the
ma‘dhūn (registrar) but in almost perfect unison those present will often utter these
key ayat (verses) under their breath. The fatḥa is the opening Sūra (chapter) of the
quran and is recited in a variety of contexts. When I asked why the fatḥa was recited
at the beginning of the contract-writing ceremony, I generally received rather brief
responses. Registrars and married informants alike would simply state that the recital
of the fatḥa at this stage was custom and/or bestowed blessings upon the couple and their families.

However, the fatḥa is also recited at the beginning of a couple’s engagement. Informants were much more expansive about the significance of the fatḥa at this point in the relationship. They argued this act imbued a relationship with a greater sense of importance. Whilst couples may have been acquainted before, the reading of the fatḥa formalised their union. An informant who had previously dated his fiancée was particularly emphatic about this point, stating that the reading of the fatḥa brought his relationship into ‘the light’. Whilst he believed that dating prior to engagement was perfectly proper, he knew others who actively disapproved of courtship prior to engagement. Thus he was more discreet about his relational past with some than with others. However, along with many others, he viewed the process of reciting the fatḥa as marking a new beginning to his relationship. Along with many others, he commented that just as the fatḥa is recognised as the beginning of the quran, so the act of reading the fatḥa is recognised as the start of an engagement. The reading of the fatḥa was also seen to sanctify a relationship or agreement between two parties. In the words of one informant, it created a ‘holy bond’ between those involved. As such it was seen to encourage people to act with honesty and integrity. The recital of the fatḥa was, furthermore, believed to indicate seriousness of intention. Whilst my informants acknowledged that engagements did dissolve, they argued that the reading of this opening Ṣūra demonstrated a certain degree of commitment to the pursuit of a relationship. This commitment would be restated and reinforced at the point of writing the marriage contract.

After the recital of the fatḥa, the paperwork is completed. Official Islamic marriage contracts in Egypt have a fairly standardised format; however, they do contain a number of ‘gaps’ in which families must detail things such as the address of the bride and groom and the cost of the muṭaṣṣar. If the contract-writing ceremony is a large gathering including many guests, then couples may choose to fill out a bulk of the marriage contract in a more intimate setting. This allows families to resolve any

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2 It must be noted that the fatḥa is also recited in other contexts such as the start of a new business agreement.
disagreements which may emerge in the process of formulating the contract away from the gaze of invited guests. As such, during the actual ceremony the bride, the groom, the guardian of the bride, the two witnesses and the ma’dhūn are left with the relatively simple task of signing the contracts and marking them with their thumbprints. This process can be quite lengthy; four copies of the contract are made and it is generally greeted with joyful ululation.

Once the contract has been completed, the ma’dhūn will generally deliver a speech mentioning various passages of the quran and hadith pertaining to marriage. Such speeches are not strictly necessary but are seen to add to the ceremony. These speeches are far from uniform but often praise God for creating man and woman and for the pleasure derived from marriage. They also refer frequently to hadith in which the prophet advised his followers on how to select a spouse. Often the ma’dhūn (registrar) will bless the couple, urge God to provide them with children who are protected from Satan and warn the couple to fear God reminding them of His omniscience.

After this speech, the groom and, in a vast majority of cases, the bride’s guardian join their hands together and proclaim their acceptance of the union. The precise way in which these hands are joined is quite unusual and difficult to describe. The thumb of the right hand is pointed towards the ceiling and the remaining fingers are curled inwards to form a fist. The thumb of the groom is pressed against that of the guardian and vice versa. A white handkerchief is subsequently placed over both hands. Once this gesture has been formed, they must perform a speech act known as *ijāb wa qabūl* (offer and acceptance). The precise wording of this exchange does vary but one example of this formula is cited below:

Groom: In the name of God, the merciful and compassionate. I ask to marry your daughter, your ward, the virgin adult according to the quran, the book of God and the Sunna of the prophet.  

3 Typical examples include dispute over the agreed cost of the *mahr*.  

4 The phrase virgin adult is generally extracted during ceremonies in which the bride has been previously married.
Father: Marry her according to the quran, the book of God and the Sunna of the prophet in accordance with the mahr agreed between us.

Groom: I accept from you to marry your daughter, from myself, to myself according to the quran, the book of God and the Sunna of the prophet in accordance with the mahr agreed between us.

It must be noted that such formulae tend to be uttered first by the ma’dhūn and then repeated by the relevant parties. Once both the bride’s guardian and the groom have proclaimed their acceptance of the union, the ma’dhūn blesses their marriage. At this point the room will, in many instances, erupt with ululation and guests will stand up, greet one another and congratulate the bride, the groom, and their immediate families. Often a relative of the bride will circulate the room distributing sweets. And other guests, particularly male, will often encourage various people in the room to pose for photographs. With the formal part of this ceremony over, the party is free to celebrate.

Before concluding this section, I would highlight a few elements of the ijāb wa qabūl a little further. First of all, this section of the ceremony tends to be conducted by the groom and the guardian of the bride. Whilst legally a woman who has reached majority is able to engage directly in this exchange, more often than not either her father or someone acting as guardian (e.g. FB) will do so on her behalf. Interestingly, the groom almost always undertakes this key speech act himself. Of course, all three parties, the bride, the groom and the guardian of the bride might, by virtue of signing the contract, be considered to have already signalled their acceptance of the union. Yet, during the performance of ijāb wa qabūl the participation of the guardian of the bride tends to take precedence over the bride herself.

Secondly, it must be noted that an expectation of the virginity amongst first-time brides is implied through the display of the white handkerchief during katb al-kitāb and is further communicated through particular versions of the ijāb wa qabūl. White
handkerchiefs are, within the context of Egyptian marriage, a particularly important symbolic vehicle. In *Avenues of Participation*, Singerman (1995) describes a practice labelled ‘*duxla baladi*’ (Singerman 1995: 97). *Duxla baladi* is said to occur on the wedding night (*laylat az-zifaaf* / *laylat ad-duxla*) and involves the piercing of the bride’s hymen with the finger of either the groom or that of the midwife. This finger is, it is important to note, covered with a white handkerchief which will, ideally, shortly thereafter become stained with blood. This handkerchief is then proudly displayed in front of a crowd of eagerly awaiting guests. Singerman notes that *duxla baladi* is now less common than it once was and that many couples prefer to consummate their union through a process called *duxla afrangi* (Singerman 1995: 97). In accordance with Singerman’s findings a number of my informants described the practice of displaying a bloodied handkerchief to eager onlookers as old-fashioned and uncouth. So, what of *dukhla afrangi*? During *dukhla afrangi* husband and wife are given the time and space to initiate conjugal relations alone but are expected to produce a bloodied handkerchief when their parents arrive for a customary visit the next day (*yūm aṣ-ṣabāḥiyya*) (Singerman 1995).

In both instances, a white handkerchief stained with blood is perceived as a potential indicator of a bride’s virginity. Whilst it is increasingly recognised that an experienced bride can feign virginity through practices such as hymenoplasty and that a virginal bride with a fragile or elastic hymen may not produce blood, handkerchiefs are still incorporated into marriage rites and continue to hold symbolic significance. Hence I would argue that the appearance of the white handkerchief at the contract-writing ceremony serves to convey an expectation of virginity amongst first-time brides.

However, in the course of observing one contract-writing ceremony I realised the handkerchief could acquire another meaning. After hearing the registrar bless the couple, I breathed a sigh of relief. Having witnessed three successive contract-writing ceremonies, I was exhausted and ready for a cup of tea. However, whilst gathering my things together, I detected a commotion at the front of the room. I raised my head to see that a friend of the groom had, to the delight of the guests, snatched the white handkerchief from the contract-writing table. Several young male
guests attempted to restrain him but he ran around the room and eventually out of the
door still clutching the handkerchief. I stood totally dumbfounded, I had no idea what
had just happened. And so when I saw the registrar who had officiated that union, I
told him what I had witnessed and asked for explanation. The registrar listened
carefully, chuckled to himself and stated that this was a ‘silly thing’, that the young
man who successfully steals the white handkerchief is said to be next to marry.
Hence, in this instance the white handkerchief had taken on a rather different
meaning.

To return to my main argument, the expectation that a first-time bride will be a virgin
is implied by the white handkerchief and explicitly stated in particular versions of the
offer and acceptance (ijāb wa qabūl). In the formula for ijāb wa qabūl cited in this
section, explicit reference is made to the status of a bride as a ‘virgin adult’ (al-ānisa
al-bint al-rashīda). No such reference is made to the status of the groom. This key
phrase is of course modified or removed in cases in which the bride has been
previously married. Yet, interestingly explicit mention of the bride’s sexual status is
not a religious requirement of ijāb wa qabūl (Ali 2008). Instead, mention of a first
time bride’s virginity appears to be an optional embellishment to this key rite, which
the registrars I encountered regularly incorporated into the contract-writing
ceremonies they officiated. I would argue that both the white handkerchief and this
key clause serve to both reflect and reinforce an expectation of virginity amongst
first-time brides. The expectation, if unmet, places the marital relationship in
jeopardy.

It is important to note that the ijāb wa qabūl does not advance a vision of marriage as
a permanent bond. In fact this rite does not make any explicit reference to the
proposed duration of the union. This is in keeping with the fact that whilst divorce in
Egypt is often described as the most hated of halal acts, it is both widely and
normatively acknowledged as a possibility that accompanies the production of a
marital union amongst Sunni Muslims. In short, this rite does not explicitly
articulate, but most certainly accommodates, the Islamic notion that marriage is a
terminable bond.
The Contract

Any analysis of the registration of marriage would be incomplete without examining the contract. The current version of the Egyptian standardised Islamic marriage contract is a ‘fill-in-the-blank’ (Sonbol 2005: 179) document which requires a number of items of basic information such as the date of birth of the bride and groom and the names and addresses of the witnesses. The standardised contract also includes two gaps in which a couple must specify the agreed value of the muGaddam and muťaxar. The latter is conventionally construed to provide women with security (ḍamān) in the face of widowhood and divorce. However, the extent to which it fulfils this function is, as discussed later in this chapter, open to debate. Finally, the standardised contract includes a blank section in which couples can stipulate their own conditions for married life. Theoretically, the process of completing this section provides prospective affines with the opportunity to articulate their expectations of a marriage, to strengthen their position within a future union and, at least partially, to safeguard certain specified interests. In short, adding extra clauses to one’s contract can help one exercise greater control over one’s post-marital circumstances. Yet, access to such agency is, as discussed later in this chapter, partially restricted by a fear of alienating one’s prospective affines.

Affines can agree upon conditions for matrimony and the value of the mahr without writing them into the contract. But the act of documenting such an agreement within a registered contract makes it legible to the state and means that one is able to appeal for state intervention in the event of its breach (Zulficar 2008; Hasso 2011). However, state recognition of a contract, and thus the contracting parties’ access to state intervention, can be undermined when the validity of the contract is placed in question. This might occur when the identity of the contracting parties or the content of the agreement is subject to challenge. For this reason, a series of procedural measures are in place which help counteract this risk and thus bolster the robustness of the agreement. These measures include the appointment of formal witnesses and a variety of techniques which serve to establish and record the identity of the contracting parties. Such techniques, then, help maintain the power of this key piece of paperwork.
The Mahr

The mahr is a sum of money which passes from the family of the groom, ideally, to the bride alone. The mahr is divided into two parts. The first part, al-muGaddam, is given either prior to or at the point of marriage. The second part, al- muT taxxar, can theoretically be given at any point after legal marriage (Moors 1995) but within Egypt is generally seen to be given after widowhood or divorce.

Space is provided within the Egyptian standardised Islamic marriage contract for families to specify the agreed value of the mahr, and the act of writing the mahr into the contract makes it more legible to the state. This has two key consequences. Firstly, it means the marriage contract can be produced as evidence in cases in which a woman is legally entitled to the muT taxxar but its value is under dispute. Secondly, it helps enable the state to create revenue from the legal act of marriage. Indeed, the mahr is subject to property tax and a percentage of its value is collected by the ma’dhūn at the point of registration. The widespread practice of providing a substantive shabka and a token muGaddam means that for many the taxation on the muGaddam is negligible. In cases in which this practice is not followed, families also have the option of writing a fictive amount in the marriage contract. However, evading taxation of the muT taxxar is not so straightforward. At the point at which the contract is formulated, the muT taxxar may be construed as an unfulfilled commitment to pay an agreed sum of money at a later date. One cannot guarantee that this commitment will be followed through. Yet, the act of recording it within a contract affords the bride a certain degree of legal protection against the rescindment of this promise. Thus for some, it is not only important that the muT taxxar is agreed but that this agreement is declared officially. Yet with the protection derived from official declaration comes taxation. This taxation can present a financial burden for some grooms. As stated earlier, the tax of the sum total of the mahr must be paid upfront at the point of registering marriage. Some prospective affines do not have such sums readily available and thus have to save up in order to pay an advanced tax on a so called ‘delayed mahr’ (muT taxxar). This can ultimately delay the registration of the union.
In the course of fieldwork, I encountered a wide range of attitudes towards the *mutaxyar*. At times, I was overwhelmed by the sheer diversity of opinion. However one thing remained clear; discussions of the *mutaxyar* acknowledge, with varying degrees of explicitness, the fragility of marriage and the possibility that an alliance will end in death or divorce. A sense that the anticipation of death can come to shape the way one thinks about the *mutaxyar* was particularly apparent in a conversation with a young engaged engineer, whom I have called Karim. I previously introduced Karim in Chapter Two. It is important to remember that Karim presented himself as a fairly pious individual. He peppered his speech with religious sayings, regularly distributed food parcels for Ramadan, spoke with enthusiasm about his experience performing Hajj and had prayed *istikhāra* at key moments of his life. When I asked Karim if he had decided upon the cost of the mahr he provided a rather interesting response. The *moqaddam*, he said, would be a token amount of 1LE but the *mutaxyar* would be enough to cover the cost of performing the Hajj.⁵ He explained that his fiancée had not been to Mecca yet and that he did not anticipate she would be able to do so in the near future. He hated the idea that he could unexpectedly die, leaving his partner financially incapable of performing this key religious duty. And so, he had agreed with his fiancée’s family that he would make provision for the Hajj within the marriage contract. In this way, this element of the marriage contract became almost like a will. Indeed, if Karim were to die, his property would be devolved by first transferring the agreed value of the *mutaxyar* to his wife and then dividing the remainder of his estate in accordance with Islamic principles. Thus, by specifying a *mutaxyar* of equal value to the cost of performing the pilgrimage, Karim was hoping to avail himself of the opportunity to at least begin to specify how he wished his property to be devolved upon death.

Registering an agreed *mutaxyar* within the marriage contract also allowed prospective affines to negotiate and at least partially determine the provision made for a wife in the event of divorce. Yet the impact of the value of the *mutaxyar* upon a woman’s quality of life after divorce was subject to debate. A high *mutaxyar* was seen to trap people into prolonging a marriage. This was made most apparent in an

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⁵ Karim did not specify precisely how much this amounted to.
interview with a 28 year old husband, whom I shall call Amr. Amr described to me how his sister had been promised 30,000 LE (approx £3750) as her muṭṭaxxar. Yet, soon after marriage she found herself in constant conflict with her husband. Amr’s father frequently had to mediate their arguments, yet as soon as harmony seemed to have been restored a new issue arose. Both Amr’s sister and her husband were miserable and their families were growing increasingly impatient with dealing with their disputes. However, Amr’s brother-in-law had not saved up the full sum of the muṭṭaxxar and was thus unable to initiate divorce. The couple were growing increasingly unhappy and so his sister eventually decided to voluntarily surrender her right to the muṭṭaxxar so they could both be released from the marriage. Hoodfar argues that high value muṭṭaxxar was used by her informants as a ‘deterrent for divorce’ (Hoodfar 1997: 68) and served to strengthen a woman’s position within a marriage. Whilst I broadly agree with this argument, it must also be noted that this strategy can backfire. As was the case with Amr’s sister, a high value muṭṭaxxar can also leave a wife feeling trapped within a marriage until such stage as she feels ready to initiate divorce of her own accord or, often with the assistance with her family, negotiates a way of releasing herself from the marriage.⁶

A few of my informants questioned the potency of the muṭṭaxxar in providing long-term protection from divorce and in ensuring that one is granted adequate material provision in the event of widowhood or divorce. First, as mentioned in Chapter Three, Egypt’s high level of inflation means that the real value of the muṭṭaxxar rapidly depreciates over time. So, whilst it might render a man financially incapable of dissolving a union in the first few years of marriage, over the longer term, the value of the muṭṭaxxar will depreciate and it becomes less of a barrier against divorce. The depreciating effect of inflation also compromises the muṭṭaxxar’s ability to deliver adequate financial protection against some of the economic vicissitudes commonly associated with widowhood and divorce. Secondly, they questioned the significance of the value of the muṭṭaxxar, compared to other forms of provision that

⁶ If a woman is to initiate divorce of her own accord she must either prove harm or contract khulʿ (no-fault, female initiated divorce). The option of khulʿ was introduced in 2000 and is somewhat controversial. Women who initiate this kind of divorce are often stigmatised (Sonneveld 2006).
a woman might access at the point of widowhood (e.g. pension) or divorce (e.g. the right to maintenance whilst their children remain within her custody).

Others still were rather critical of mobilising the muṬaxxar to meet such objectives. Young bachelors would complain that such practices indicated a lack of trust in one’s commitment to the relationship and were therefore an insult. One memorable example of this occurred when a particularly outspoken friend of my language exchange partner peered over my shoulder to see what new vocabulary I had learnt. He spotted within this list, the word muṬaxxar. He swiftly proceeded to chastise her for teaching me such words and launched into an impassioned diatribe about the marriage crisis in Egypt. He spoke about the materialism of bride’s families, the economic burdens placed upon young grooms and the lack of trust people have in one another. He then said that if a bride’s family requested a high muṬaxxar he would end the relationship immediately. My language exchange partner gently teased him, stating that if he loved the girl enough and was eager enough to marry her, he would carry on anyway. After much goading, he eventually conceded that if she was very special he might reconsider.

Yet the point is this: in Egypt the muṬaxxar is strongly associated with death and divorce. The fact that the value of the muṬaxxar is routinely incorporated into marriage contracts means that a legal document that, on the one hand, formalises and solidifies a union, on the other hand both acknowledges and plans for the possibility of its demise. The contract is, then, concerned with both the production and destruction of relatedness.

**Conditions**

Unlike its predecessor, the new version of the Egyptian standardised Islamic marriage contract includes a space in which couples can, within limits, specify conditions for their married life. This change to the contract was preceded by a sustained campaign by the feminist collective ‘The Communication Group for the Enhancement of the Status of Women in Egypt’ who sought, amongst other legal reforms, to remodel the marriage contract to better suit the individual requirements of
the contracting parties. This collective consisted of prominent professional women including lawyer, Mona Zulficar, and politician, Mervat Tallawi. This collective formally and publicly introduced its campaign to reconfigure the Egyptian standardised Islamic marriage contract in 1985. The state eventually introduced a new version of this contract in 2000.

The practice of including conditions within the marriage contract was relatively common during Egypt’s Ottoman period (Sonbol 2005; Abdel-Rehim 1996) and is also found in other Islamic countries (Wynn 2008). However the prevalence of this practice began to decline with the introduction of a standardised contract and the codification of family laws in the early twentieth century. This eventually led to a situation in which ‘the marriage contract had lost its contractual features and had become more like a registration certificate’ (Zulficar 2008: 235).

A number of historians have argued that this change in the nature of the contract was of potential consequence to Egyptian women’s position within marriage (Sonbol 2005; Abdel-Rehim 1996). In a fascinating analysis of the history of Egyptian marriage contracts, Sonbol provides a detailed description of the various conditions included within marriage documents drafted during the Ottoman Period. Sonbol describes how Ottoman contracts included clauses about issues such as the provision of domestic assistance, the location of the conjugal home, the wife’s housekeeping budget, and the wife’s freedom to divorce if her husband took a second wife. Such clauses, it must be noted, tended to further the interests of the wife but occasionally clauses would be added to advance the interests of the husband. The process of drafting this kind of contract allowed prospective affines to articulate explicitly their expectations of the other and the nature of their union together (Sonbol 2005). Yet it also provided prospective affines with a means through which they could, at least, attempt to ensure that certain specified interests were safeguarded. In cases in which conditions within the contract were not adhered to, a husband or wife (or the wife’s appointed guardian) was able to apply for divorce on the basis of breach of contract. For husbands this was of little consequence; they were able to initiate divorce anyway. Yet for wives this was of great significance. It allowed a wife to divorce her husband in the absence of proven harm without losing any financial entitlements.
this way, the incorporation of conditions within the marriage contract ‘facilitated separation from unwanted husbands’ (Sonbol 2005: 159) and therefore helped strengthen a woman’s position within a marriage.

For members of The Communication Group for the Enhancement of the Status of Women in Egypt the fact that the Egyptian marriage contract had, by the late 20th Century, become less of a contract and more of a ‘registration certificate’ (Zulficar 2008: 235) was viewed with much regret. They argued that in this process a key vehicle through which a wife’s interests within a marriage could be protected and access to divorce could be enhanced had been lost. They thus proposed a new model of standardised marriage contract which would, once again, allow prospective affines to stipulate their own conditions for married life.

Included within this campaign was a concern about women’s access to divorce. Prior to 2000, a woman’s capacity to divorce was contingent upon her husband taking the exceptional measure of granting her prior permission to divorce of her own accord (‘iṣna) or her ability to prove harm. The definition of harm within Egyptian law is rather limited but includes ‘desertion, imprisonment, sterility, sexual deviance, lack of financial support and harm due to a husband taking a second wife’ (Singerman 2005: 165). However, the process of proving such harm to the satisfaction of a court is often difficult, stressful and time-consuming (Al Sharmani 2010). Even when a court has granted a woman unilateral divorce on the basis of proven harm, she still faces the possibility that her husband will appeal the decision at a later date. Anxiety about this possibility prevents some divorcées from pursuing a second marriage (Singerman 2005). Egyptian women’s access to divorce was, then, seriously restricted.

The Communication Group for the Enhancement of the Status of Women in Egypt’s work on the standardised marriage contract helped address this situation in a number of ways. Firstly, the new version of the standardised contract and its associated legislation meant that if a condition specified within the contract is violated, an unhappy wife is able to initiate divorce on the basis of breach of contract. This kind of divorce does not compromise a woman’s financial rights and, crucially here, does not require a husband to commit or require a wife to prove he has committed ‘harm’
as defined by the courts. Secondly, the group campaigned to increase public awareness of women’s ability to include a clause about the right of ‘iṣna within her contract. It is, perhaps, no coincidence that in 2000 regulations were introduced which meant registrars were legally obliged to inform couples of the possibility of expanding a wife’s right to divorce in this way. Finally, in earlier drafts of the model marriage contract, The Communication Group for the Enhancement of the Status of Women in Egypt put forward the idea that a couple could stipulate that the wife will be provided with the option of surrendering ‘all her financial rights in exchange’ (Zulficar 2008: 262) for a no-fault ‘irrevocable divorce’ (Zulficar 2008: 262). This was subsequently removed from the final draft of the reformulated marriage contract. However, this idea was not forgotten. Instead, in the year 2000, along with the introduction of the new standardised marriage contract, legislation was introduced which gave women the right to perform what is known as ‘khul’. This enables women to initiate a unilateral, no-fault divorce but requires her to return the muGaddam and to surrender her rights to alimony and the muTâxar. Ultimately The Communication Group for the Enhancement of the Status of Women in Egypt’s work helped, in a diversity of ways, to increase Egyptian women’s legal access to divorce.

Yet this campaign was not solely about access to divorce. It was also about providing prospective affines with a legal tool which allowed them to articulate their expectations of a marriage, to strengthen their position within a future union and to, at least partially, safeguard certain specified interests. Such aims, it is argued, can be achieved through strategic and skilful negotiation of the terms of the marriage contract. The validity of these terms is contingent upon their compatibility with the Shariah but the law does, essentially, grant couples considerable freedom to determine their own conditions for the contract of marriage.

Despite the profound sense of anxiety and uncertainty which surrounds marriage in Egypt, registrars reported that very few couples made use of this freedom. When I asked actual or prospective spouses if they had elected to or were intending to include special conditions within their marriage contract, they tended to speak rather negatively. Many argued that reaching consensus on issues such as the location of
the conjugal home or the cost of the shabka was difficult enough and the idea of raising new issues to be negotiated, and perhaps argued about, was distinctly unappealing.

However, two of my informants did in fact take the unorthodox decision of adding conditions to their contract. Dina had heard about my research through a friend and was keen to discuss her experiences. So we spoke on the phone and arranged to meet in a small cafe in Heliopolis. However, forty five minutes later, I was still sitting in the cafe waiting for her to arrive. Dina called to say she was stuck in traffic and struggling to find a place to park. Thus we agreed to meet outside and proceed to a restaurant in a quieter part of town. So, Dina pulled up, I jumped into her car, was introduced to one of her friends and we drove to a large restaurant with wicker chairs, shisha pipes and wide screen televisions. We all ordered a juice and began to chat. Both Dina and her friend were single mothers and relished the opportunity to go out. They were very close, often finished one another’s sentences, and spoke a great deal.

Dina described to me how she met her husband, how they had got married and how they eventually divorced. When talking about the contract-writing ceremony she grew particularly animated. She had personally insisted that her and her husband include a clause stating that her husband must inform her if he marries another woman. I was already aware that the registrar was legally bound to send a notification of such an event to the first wife and so questioned her further. Dina explained that even though such regulations exist, she had a friend whose husband had married again without her knowledge and she was keen to ensure that the same thing did not happen to her. She did not believe that any husband would be able to treat two or more wives equally and was therefore personally opposed to polygamy. Hence she was keen to ensure that she did not become an unwitting party to this kind of marriage. She had made clear, to both her parents and her husband, that she would not proceed with marriage unless a clause about polygamy was written into the contract. Thus whilst they were somewhat surprised by her actions, they agreed to her demands.
For another informant whom I shall call Waleed, the act of stipulating a condition within the marriage contract was less about protecting oneself from the actualisation of one’s fears and more about communicating expectations of a relationship and constructing identity. I first met Waleed through a friend who had attended university with him in the UK. Waleed was from an upper class Egyptian family, worked for an NGO and identified himself as an ‘activist’. Upon hearing I was doing research on marriage, he stated that his own marriage was ‘unusual’ and that we should talk. After a few meetings, we did eventually talk. Waleed spoke passionately about his political beliefs and stated that, in his view, one’s personal and political life cannot be separated. He thus argued that marriage provided him with an opportunity to apply his political values in a new context. He stated that both he and his wife were keen to ensure that their marriage together was consistent with their political outlook. So, much to the despair of their families and the bewilderment of the registrar, they decided to state within their contract, that their marriage would be based upon the principles of equality, non-violence, sustainability, pan-Africanism and voluntarism.

Waleed spoke at length about four of these five principles and the implications they held for his marriage. Yet, when I asked him why he had included pan-Africanism in his contract he simply stated ‘Egypt is part of Africa’. I persisted by asking how this affected his marriage, at which, he paused and then stated again, that ‘Egypt is part of Africa’. Later that evening, I sat down to write my fieldnotes and thought about what Waleed had said. It struck me that, in many respects, the condition that he had added to his marriage contract was unenforceable. What constituted pan-Africanism and sustainability? And how would one know that these principles had been contravened to the extent that one could apply for divorce on the basis of breach of contract? It seemed that Waleed and his partner had not given the legal efficacy of their addition to the contract much thought. Instead, the writing of this condition served as a means through which the couple could negotiate and declare their chosen way of life after marriage, and reaffirm their identity as political and environmental activists.

In many ways, the writing of a condition into a marriage contract is similar to the act of promise-making. It requires either one or both parties to commit to acting in
certain ways or being certain things in the future. Hannah Arendt famously describes the act of making and keeping promises as a ‘remedy for unpredictability’ (Arendt 1958: 237) and argues that ‘binding oneself through promises serves to set up in the ocean of uncertainty, which the future is by definition, islands of security without which not even continuity, let alone durability of any kind, would be possible in the relationships between men’ (Arendt 1958: 237). In keeping with this view, I would argue that the process of stipulating conditions within a marriage contract can help people determine either their own or their loved one’s conjugal destiny before marriage. And it can therefore dispel some of the fear and uncertainty associated with yoking oneself or one’s loved one with another whose future conduct is never entirely predictable.

However, promises can be broken and, with this prospect in mind, the adding of a condition into a contract becomes something quite different, it becomes something that is ‘legible’ (Scott 1998: 2) to a state whose adjudication can thus be sought in the event of dispute. Certain conditions, such as a husband’s agreement to provide a monthly allowance, are enforceable by law. Other conditions, such as a husband’s commitment not to take another wife, may not be legally enforceable, but when breached, become a basis for divorce. In this way, the writing of special clauses into a marriage contract serves to imbue the conditions of an agreement with extra legal weight and/or provides a means of releasing oneself from a legal union when that agreement is broken (Zulficar 2008). Thus the adding of a condition into a contract is similar to, but distinct from, a mere promise between two parties.

So, given the level of anxiety which surrounds marriage in Egypt, why don’t more people include special conditions within their marriage contract? For many people I spoke with, the act of incorporating ‘special conditions’ into one’s contract was seen as a potential source of tension that, given that this option was only reintroduced in 2000, could not be dissipated or depersonalised with the words ‘this is normal in our family.’ Whilst extra clauses within a contract might provide a legal means of exercising greater control over one’s post-marital circumstances, they also hold the potential of alienating prospective affines. Thus securing assurance about one’s post-marital circumstances in this manner was seen as a risky strategy which may place an
engagement in jeopardy. Hence the very process of acquiring a certain kind of legal security was itself perceived to produce new forms of insecurity.

**The Witnesses**

The legal validity of a marriage contract is dependent upon sufficient formal witness. This role is conventionally fulfilled by two adult males. In the eyes of my informants, the ideal witness was not an impartial bystander but instead a trusted male relative. One such relative would be elected from the family of the bride and another from the family of the groom. Whilst it is acknowledged that guests at contract signing ceremonies engage in a form of witness, the nature of this witness is quite distinct from that provided by those officially appointed by the families of the bride and the groom.

Regular guests view the actual signing of the contract and the marking of it with thumbprints but they do not normally read the details of its content. Official witnesses, on the other hand, are privy to all the terms written in the contract including the value of the mahr. Such information is sometimes sensitive. Hence an official witness must be relied upon to exercise appropriate discretion. An official witness’s knowledge of the details of the terms of a marriage contract is, despite the associated risk of disclosure of potentially sensitive information, important in two key ways. First of all, such knowledge can serve to pre-empt any potential breach of contract. Second, officially appointed witnesses are granted with primary responsibility for providing testimony in the event of dispute over breach of contract. Such testimony can play an instrumental role in upholding the integrity of an agreement and this, perhaps, explains why the identity of an official witness, unlike that of a regular guest, is recorded by the ma’dhūn.

The appointment of formal witnesses is a legal prerequisite and normative feature of Sunni marriage. For this reason, one of the key implications of this act is occasionally overlooked. Formal witnesses can be called upon in the ‘event of a future dispute’ (Fadel 1997: 197) and in this way their appointment can help

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7 For more information on gender, Islam and witness, see Fadel 1997.
safeguard the integrity of an agreement. They therefore help enhance the robustness of an agreement and their appointment is to a certain extent an acknowledgement of the possibility of future conflict.

**Identifying Agents**

During my time at Al-Azhar I could not help but notice the significant amount of time and energy registrars invest in establishing and recording the identity of the bride, the groom, and the witnesses. Both bride and groom must provide four passport photographs of themselves which are signed and marked with a thumbprint in the presence of the witnesses and the *ma’dhūn*. These photos are subsequently affixed to each copy of the marriage contract. They are also expected to present the *ma’dhūn* with their national identity card.\(^8\) This is inspected by the *ma’dhūn* and its details are diligently recorded in the contract. Slightly less effort is put into tracing and recording the identity of the two witnesses. Nonetheless, they are expected to provide proof of identity, the details of which, along with the witness’ place of residence are recorded in the contract. The witnesses are, furthermore, required to sign the foot of the contract and mark it with their thumbprint. This is also expected of the bride, the groom, the registrar and, where appropriate, the guardian of the bride.

Whilst it might be tempting to dismiss such activities as mere bureaucratic procedure, they do serve an important function. Identification documents provide the *ma’dhūn* with a means, however effective this may be, of checking if an unknown individual is who they purport to be. Photos, thumbprints and signatures all offer a means of materially corroborating the presence of a given individual at the time that a marriage was officiated (Messick 1993; Goody 1986). The witnesses, along with the bride and groom, must also provide their home address and national identity number. This facilitates contact if testimony is required. In short, the registration of the marriage involves a number of procedures which help prevent fraud and allow for verification of identity in the event of future dispute. This helps establish and

\(^8\) All Egyptians are legally obliged to apply for an ID card within 30 days of their sixteenth birthday.
maintain the validity of a marriage contract and thus helps secure one’s access to state protection.

**Conclusion**

In many ways, this chapter is testimony to the vulnerability of those wishing to marry. It is common for Cairenes to describe unmarried people, in particular, single women, as being caught ‘between two fires’ (*bayn naarayn*). On the one hand, an inauspicious marriage can be a source of substantial hardship, and thus every effort should be made to protect oneself and one’s loved ones from future suffering. Yet, on the other hand, long-term spinsterhood and bachelorhood are also regarded as a source of suffering. Persons in this state are perceived to lead lonely existences where they are unable to experience the joys of matrimony and parenthood. Such individuals also face the possibility of being marginalised and stigmatised by others.

In the process of writing this chapter, I began to realise that this metaphor of being caught ‘between two fires’ (*bayn naarayn*) captured something quite important about the process of registering a marriage in Egypt. Drawing inspiration from Michael Lambek, I have argued that the performance of *katb al-kitāb* serves to ‘recalibrate the criteria and shift the ethical context’ (Lambek 2010: 56) in which a couple’s subsequent conduct is evaluated. For this reason, actions that might have been deemed improper or potentially controversial before the performance of *katb al-kitāb* (such as late-night visits) come to be seen as proper and relatively uncontroversial after the signing of the contract. And so, couples who seek to reduce the risk that their interactions will be subject to social censorship frequently opt to contract their marriages sooner rather than later. However, I also note that the act of contracting a marriage makes legal divorce and the harmful effects it can have upon one’s future eligibility a distinct possibility. In this way, the process of avoiding one form of risk results in exposure to another.

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9 The extent to which the reality conforms to this perception is, of course, debatable.
The new version of the Egyptian standardised Islamic marriage contract contains space in which couples can, within limits, specify the terms of their union. Theoretically such freedom provides prospective spouses and their families with a legal means of exercising greater control over either their own or their loved one’s post-marital circumstances. Indeed, much like the act of making a promise, the addition of a clause into a contract might be seen as part of an effort to ‘set up in the ocean of uncertainty, which the future is by definition, islands of security’ (Arendt 1958: 237). However, the decision to add extra clauses to one’s contract holds the potential to alienate prospective affines and can thus place a relationship in jeopardy. And so the process of attaining a certain form of legal security in fact gives rise to another form of insecurity. One form of protection brings forth another form of peril.

In a similar vein, official witnesses to a marriage serve a protective function. They uphold the legal validity of a contract and are responsible for providing testimony in the event of dispute. They thus play a key role in safeguarding the integrity of an agreement. However the process of producing such witnesses requires the contracting parties to share sometimes quite sensitive information about things such as the value of the mahr. And this brings a risk of wider disclosure. Ultimately, in all these situations we see that the process of avoiding risk is not without risk and that those seeking to marry are in many ways caught ‘between two fires’ (bayn naarayn). This dynamic may help us understand something of the anxiety and uncertainty that so frequently surrounds the cultivation of marriage amongst Cairene Muslims and may also help explain why certain protective measures are not always put to use.
A Public Marriage: A Reflection upon Transparency, Regulation and Protection

In the previous chapter I drew attention to the role of formal witnesses in the production of marriage in Egypt. I argued that the formal witnesses to a marriage serve an important protective function. They uphold the legal validity of a contract and are responsible for providing testimony in the event of dispute and therefore play an important role in safeguarding the integrity of an agreement. Witnesses, then, play a central role in creating the conditions for accountability in the future and an awareness of the possibility of future accountability might, in fact, serve to pre-empt any breach of contract. Yet reinforcing accountability in this manner is not without risk. Indeed the process of producing witnesses to the terms of one’s marriage requires the bride and groom to share sometimes quite sensitive information about phenomena such as the value of the mahr. And this brings the risk of wider disclosure.

In the course of fieldwork, I began to realise that a number of practices associated with marriage-making served to bolster one’s ability to make a given partner accountable for their actions in the future. In this chapter I discuss a celebration known as yoom at-tangeed (the day of upholstery), a piece of paperwork known as al-Gayma (the list) and gawaaz al-erfee (unregistered marriage). In so doing, I will draw upon recent scholarship on audit. Whilst I do not deal with the topic of audit per se, I have found that literature on this topic provides particularly thought-provoking analysis of transparency, accountability and regulation that is of specific pertinence to the present study of marriage.

There are, for example, some interesting parallels between the ways in which authors such as Power (1997a, b), Strathern (2000, 2006) and Tsoukas (1997) have spoken about trust in the context of audit and the ways in which my informants spoke about the kinds of visibility and prospective accountability produced by the drafting of the Gayma. This will be explored further in the course of this chapter, as will recent
commentary on the nature of transparency and on the impact of the prospect of future accountability upon present conduct. This chapter ultimately proffers a reflection upon the relationship between transparency, regulation and protection in the context of the forging of Muslim marriage in Cairo.

The Day of Upholstery

In this section, I describe a celebration known as yoom at-tangeed (the day of upholstery) and consider what this celebration tells us about the relationship between public witness, regulation, and protection. My account of this key celebration is based upon participation in the yoom at-tangeed of a young bride living in the working class district of Moneib.

When Radwa first invited me to her yoom at-tangeed, I was frankly, quite confused. I had no idea what she was talking about. None of the literature I consulted prior to arriving in Egypt made use of this key phrase and nobody else had ever spoken about it. And so, I was compelled to express my gratitude for the invitation and then ask what exactly I was being invited to. Radwa explained that it was an event in which her neighbour would be stuffing a mattress with cotton and she would be displaying her trousseau. Confused yet intrigued by this prospect, I gleefully accepted her invitation.

Later that week, I mentioned to a friend that I had been invited to a yoom at-tangeed and asked what I should wear and whether I should bring a gift. Somewhat surprised, she told me that she had never attended a yoom at-tangeed herself; that this was something that only really took place in working class neighbourhoods. She suggested that, as this was a celebration, I should dress up and then, looking down at my partially covered forearms, she added I should wear long sleeves. She moved on to state that, in her opinion, it would be quite wrong to bring a gift. Finally, and quite disturbingly, she warned me to be careful.

So, over a week later, with a mixture of excitement and apprehension, I took the metro and then a tuk-tuk to Radwa’s home in Moneib. I arrived to find the street had
been blocked off and to hear dance music blaring from loud speakers. Blankets, bed covers and table cloths were suspended on pieces of string tied from building to building like bunting. On the street outside Radwa’s home, a man was squatting on reed mats stuffing, what looked like, a cushion with cotton. Friends and neighbours sat around on seats watching and chatting whilst Radwa and her family distributed soft drinks. After a while Radwa and various female relatives began to bring the contents of her trousseau down from her familial flat onto the street. All items were removed from their boxes and proudly displayed on trestle tables and chairs situated beside the upholsterer. Guests walked around admiring this display.

When the upholsterer had finished stuffing the final mattress a number of women began to ululate, the music was turned up a notch and people started to dance. At this moment, my friend Marwa sprinted up to her sister’s flat, walked onto the balcony and began throwing sweets to the children below. The excited children leapt up to catch them and then scabbled on the ground to gather the confectionery they had failed to catch. Upon the call to prayer, the music and dancing stopped and people gradually began to say their farewells and depart. Eventually Radwa and her family began to take her trousseau back upstairs. And so, I expressed my gratitude, said goodbye and arranged to meet Radwa, Marwa and others the following week.

At first, I thought this entire celebration was just an elaborate form of conspicuous consumption. Yet a comment made by a mutual friend of Radwa and mine forced me to reconsider. I asked this friend why everything was being displayed. At first she simply stated ‘so that everyone can see it’. I then asked why this was necessary. At this point I received a quite unexpected response. She explained that such displays mean that a number of people have seen exactly what Radwa brought into the marriage. So, if there was any dispute over the ownership of a particular item of property, they would be able to intervene. It seems that this celebration is, at least partially, about producing witnesses to, and collective memory of, the contents of the bride’s trousseau. Such memory can prove particularly useful in the event of divorce. In this way, yoom at-tangeed both acknowledges and plans for the possibility that a marriage will end in divorce. Ultimately, this event serves to highlight and, to a certain extent, temper the vulnerability of women within the context of marriage.
Yet, it must be noted that this celebration is not undertaken by all Cairene Muslim families. Indeed, in certain middle and upper class neighbourhoods *yoom at-tangeed* is virtually unheard of. I should mention that Moneib is a very specific kind of neighbourhood. Its population is predominantly working class and are not generally blessed with either spacious living conditions or the financial resources to invest in hiring a venue. Whilst some streets are rather crowded, the density of the traffic in this neighbourhood, unlike that of other neighbourhoods, does not make the idea of blocking off a street to satisfy the specific purposes of a particular set of residents unthinkable. As a consequence, many familial celebrations either spontaneously spill over or are purposefully situated in the street. Despite being located in one of the world’s great metropolises, for many, life in this neighbourhood is anything but anonymous. For this reason the contents of a neighbour’s trousseau is a matter of acute interest and neighbours often find themselves intervening in one another’s domestic affairs. Thus in a neighbourhood like Moneib, the kind of visibility and public witness generated through *yoom at-tangeed* helps promote extra-judicial regulation and protection of individual property rights.

Yet, the trousseau of a bride who does not celebrate *yoom at-tangeed* is not completely devoid of public visibility. Indeed, it is not uncommon for such brides or indeed their families to show items of the trousseau to visiting guests. Such displays are generally described as spontaneous and informal. Nonetheless, they do allow for the production of potential witnesses whose testimony can be requested in the event of property dispute but whose mere existence makes the likelihood of dispute all the more remote. Such witnesses can help legitimate a bride’s claims to a given item of property and may thereby allow for the protection and maintenance of her property rights. Yet however the bride’s trousseau may be displayed to others, the fact that it is displayed makes this aspect of the bride’s material contribution to the marriage more publicly visible. And in a society where reputation is all important, this enhanced visibility can help shield the bride from the potential misappropriation of the contents of her trousseau.
The Gayma

Within the context of marriage the term *Gayma* refers to a kind of ‘inventory’ (El Kholy 2002: 110) and ‘safekeeping contract’ (El Kholy 2002) which lists all items of property belonging to the bride and places them under the custody of the groom. It tends to be written in the latter stages of a couple’s engagement and must be signed by the groom. Whilst the *Gayma* is not a registered document, it does carry substantial legal weight. It is important to highlight that the *Gayma* is ‘only meant to be consulted in specific circumstances by a highly restricted number of people’ (Dupret & Drieskens 2008: 15). I thus find myself in the somewhat strange position of writing about a document that I have never actually seen but have discussed in great depth.

It must be noted that within Islam ‘marriage does not result in community property between husband and wife’ (Moors 1994: 304; Al Sharmani 2010) but instead each spouse is seen to be entitled to ‘independently control any property owned before marriage or acquired thereafter’ (Moors 1994: 304). As a consequence, the bride’s ownership over the assets listed in the *Gayma* is unaffected by marriage and for this reason the *Gayma* can play an important role in determining how property should be distributed in the event of divorce. Indeed, those of my informants who actively supported the practice of writing a *Gayma* prior to marriage spoke of its value in precisely these circumstances. The *Gayma*, they argued, constituted vital ‘proof’ (*ithbāt*) of a woman’s rights over particular items of property and helped guard against the misappropriation of such assets when a marriage ends in divorce.

However, many other informants were actively opposed to the practice of producing such a document. Many viewed the desire to draft a *Gayma* as indicative of a lack of trust. They argued that people who wrote a *Gayma* not only lacked faith in the future longevity of a relationship but, worse still, lacked faith in the character of the groom. They did not trust the groom to treat his prospective wife fairly in the event of divorce, and suspected that in such circumstances he might be tempted to misappropriate her property. For this reason, many regarded the writing of a *Gayma* as an insult to the groom.
However compelling this argument may be, I do feel a greater sense of empathy towards those who choose to write a *Gayma* is required. In the course of fieldwork I began to notice that the practice of writing a *Gayma* seemed to be more prevalent amongst the less affluent. This was also apparent in a conversation with a slightly older, upper class divorcée, whom I shall call Ghada. Ghada had recently divorced and held some very strong views about marriage and relationships. One afternoon, whilst sipping coffee in Ghada’s sitting room, I asked if she had ever written a *Gayma*. She responded by tutting loudly and stating that she would not ‘dream of it’ explaining that this was a ‘*sha’bī* custom’ (*sha’bī* is an Arabic term that depending upon context can mean popular, working class or uncouth) and was not ‘the done thing’. I immediately realised I had committed a faux pas and quickly tried to recover from this mistake by declaring my naivety. This conversation forced me to think about the relationship between trust, property and socio-economic status.

The fact that the practice of writing a *Gayma* is more common amongst those in a less fortunate economic position is no mere coincidence. Mollering describes vulnerability as a ‘pre-condition for trust’ (Mollering 2006: 8). He argues that in the process of trusting another, we often place phenomena that can enhance or compromise our future welfare in that person’s hands with the ‘expectation’ that they will act in a manner that will promote or safeguard our wellbeing. However this ‘expectation’ is based upon imperfect knowledge, and thus trust always entails a certain degree of risk. We can never be certain that a person will live up to this ‘expectation’. A similar argument is advanced by Kelly and Thiranagama (2010).

The risk of trusting a prospective affine to respect a bride’s property rights, in the absence of the legal assurance granted by the *Gayma*, is not commensurate across the classes. Whereas for some brides, household items such as washing machines may be replaceable, for others they will be once in a life time purchases. For certain brides, loss of the kind of property typically listed in the *Gayma* is a short term inconvenience. Yet for others the loss of such property can have devastating and long term effects upon their quality of life. Thus the omission of a *Gayma* puts poor brides in a disproportionately more vulnerable position than their wealthy counterparts.
Therefore the level of trust that the decision not to write a Gayma requires is influenced by material circumstance.

Thus far, I have paid particular attention to the relationship between the Gayma and the vulnerability of prospective wives. However, one of my informants, whom I shall call Amr, spoke with particular passion about the Gayma and the vulnerability of the groom. Amr had heard about my research through a friend and was keen to speak about his experiences. So, after exchanging a couple of e-mails, we agreed to meet in a coffee shop in the upper class neighbourhood of Mohandiseen. At the time we met, Amr had been married for three years. Shortly after ordering coffee, Amr proceeded to describe how he had met his wife, how their relationship developed and how they had eventually prepared for marriage. After he had described his approach to furnishing the conjugal home, I decided to ask Amr about his opinion of the custom of writing a Gayma. Quite unexpectedly this question sparked a long and fascinating critique of this practice.

Amr began by making the rather predictable comment that the writing of a Gayma is symptomatic of the bridal family’s lack of trust in both the relationship and the groom. Yet he then proceeded to argue that the Gayma can be used by the bride’s family to ‘kick his [the groom’s] butt’ if he seeks divorce. He explained that if a man’s decision to initiate divorce defies the wishes of his affines they may mobilise the Gayma in an effort to wreak ‘revenge’ for his actions. If a woman’s family are angry enough about the dissolution of a relationship, they can summon the groom to locate all items listed on the Gayma and present them at either the local police station or maktab al- ma’dhūn (registrar’s office). If any items are missing or broken, the bride’s family can choose either to negotiate a settlement or initiate criminal proceedings (see El K holy 2002; Zulficar 2008). Amr did not know what such a groom would be charged with but was quite insistent that such proceedings could lead to imprisonment. Later on, I consulted a legal text and found out that in such circumstances a groom may be charged with ‘misappropriation or breach of trust’ (Zulficar 2008:248). Both of these can lead to a penal sentence. Yet ultimately, Amr believed that the Gayma was susceptible to severe misuse. Amr claimed that in some cases a bride’s family will modify the contents of the Gayma after it has been signed
by the groom. Such misuse he argued could lead to the wrongful imprisonment of innocent men and for this reason he claimed the writing of a Gayma placed the groom in an extremely precarious position.

Somewhat unsurprisingly, Amr and his wife had not opted to write a Gayma. However Amr spoke at great length about debate within his family as to whether his sister should draft a Gayma prior to marriage. He stated that both his parents were deeply opposed to this practice and shared his view that the decision to write a Gayma was symptomatic of an underlying sense of mistrust. However, his uncle (FB) did not share this opinion, and repeatedly urged his parents to draft this key document. The more his parents resisted, the more insistent his uncle became. On numerous occasions, Amr’s uncle accused his brother of neglecting his daughter’s rights. Amr reported that in the lead up to his sister’s wedding this conflict had blighted a number of family gatherings and that for some time the relationship between his father and his uncle was strained. It is important to note that within this family, Amr’s uncle had built up a reputation for being particularly skilled at writing the Gayma. In fact, on a number of occasions he had been asked to draft this document on behalf of various female relatives. In Amr’s opinion, his uncle took considerable pride in this role and expected to be asked to write a Gayma on the behalf of his niece. When this request was not forthcoming, he suffered a loss of pride. Yet, apart from this, the dispute was essentially about conflicting definitions of kin care. The two brothers disagreed about the role of the Gayma in protecting the future conjugal welfare of their female kin. For Amr’s uncle, failure to write a Gayma was a major dereliction of paternal duties. By contrast, Amr’s father was cautious about alienating prospective kin and believed that this document was no substitute for a groom whom one could trust. As it happened, Amr’s sister got divorced within a couple of years of marriage. This was a mutual decision and, as mentioned in the previous chapter, in a bid to secure her exit from this relationship she surrendered her rights to part of the muraذاخ. Yet, crucially here, she retained ownership over all items she had brought into the marriage despite not writing a Gayma.
Even if a couple and their families agree to the principle of writing a *Gayma*, the process of actually undertaking this task is far from straightforward. Typically the *Gayma* is written either by the bride’s father or a nominated male relative. However, occasionally illiterate fathers will ask marriage registrars to draft this document on their behalf. In all such cases, it is crucial that the family trusts in the competence and discretion of the person drafting this document. After all, the writing of a *Gayma* is a highly complex and sensitive task.

The ethnographic literature provides a somewhat confused picture of the items recorded in the *Gayma*. On the one hand, Singerman and Wikan state that the *Gayma* simply lists items included in the ‘*gihaaz*’ (Singerman 1995: 119; see also Wikan 1980) or bridal trousseau. On the other hand, Hoodfar and El Kholy claim that ‘all items of furniture and equipment belonging to the new home’ (El Kholy 2002:110) are recorded in the *Gayma* as the ‘sole property of the bride’ (El Kholy 2002:110) and that ‘these items include the goods contributed by the bride, those contributed by the groom and the items they receive jointly as gifts’ (El Kholy 2002: 110; see also Hoodfar 1988). Yet none of these authors either acknowledge or attempt to explain this variation in the way in which the *Gayma* is written.

In the course of fieldwork, I found that the way in which the *Gayma* was written was not always simply a product of local community norms but was instead shaped by both the material circumstances of, and interpersonal negotiations between, prospective affines. For example, in the course of a conversation with Ahmed and Eman, I asked about the mahr. Eman stated that the two families had agreed upon a *muGaddam* of 1LE and a *muTaxxar* of 10,000 LE (approximately £1250). Ahmed added, that although the *muTaxxar* appeared quite modest, they had, after some discussion, agreed that all of the furniture he had purchased for their future home would be recorded in the *Gayma* and would thereby become the property of Eman. He then joked that if the couple were to divorce, he would be ‘on the street’ with no

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1 It is interesting to note that within Cairo the *Gayma* does not tend to include immovable assets such as houses. In Chapter Four, I mentioned that houses tend to be provided by the husband and/or his kin. Upon divorce, a wife is legally entitled to reside in the conjugal home or alternative residence provided by the husband as long as she retains custody over the couple’s children (Zulficar 1995).
sofa to sit on and no bed to sleep in. In short, the dissolution of their relationship would place him at risk of material hardship.

So, in this instance the Gayma had been written in a manner that would compensate for a rather modest mu'Taxxar. The way in which the Gayma was written was, moreover, a topic of both explicit discussion and quite conscious negotiation between affines. It most certainly was not the product of two families mindlessly following local customs. It is also worth noting that this particular approach to the mu'Taxxar and Gayma meant that Ahmed spent less on the statutory tax upon the mahr than he might have done otherwise. In the previous chapter, I mentioned that a woman who performs khul’ (i.e. initiates unilateral no-fault divorce) is legally compelled to return the muGaddam to her husband and to surrender her rights to the mu'Taxxar and alimony. I also stated that women who initiate this kind of divorce are often stigmatised (see Sonneveld 2006). So whilst I felt unable to broach this topic, it should be also be noted that if Eman were to perform ‘khul’ she would be forced to forego her rights to the mu'Taxxar but would retain legal ownership to all items listed in the Gayma. Hence in the context of the new laws on khul’, it could be argued that Ahmed and Eman’s arrangement provides Eman with a greater level of economic security than a mu'Taxxar of, say, 20,000 LE and a Gayma that merely lists items included in the trousseau would provide.

In this way, the writing of the Gayma can be strategically deployed to effectuate a transfer of legal ownership over specified items of property. Yet even when the Gayma is not employed to accomplish this purpose, the process of determining its contents can still generate controversy. One evening, after attending an art exhibition at a local cultural centre, I bumped into a bunch of friends and acquaintances. They were all in their final year of university and anxious about their futures after graduation. So, once a week they met at the centre to support one another in writing CVs and application forms, to exchange information about job fairs and training programmes and of course to socialise. Over the course of the year, I had got to know various members of this group quite well. So, I joined them for a cup of tea and was duly introduced to a woman in her early twenties. She had heard I was doing
research about marriage and therefore asked how things were going and made a few rather general comments about the costs associated with getting married in Egypt.

As our conversation progressed, more and more people got involved. Her comments about the cost of marriage had triggered a discussion about the trousseau and then the *Gayma*. I mentioned that whilst I had heard about the *Gayma*, I still did not really know what it was. I had never seen this document for myself. A few other girls nodded sympathetically and confided that even though they intended to write a *Gayma* at some point in the future, they had no idea what this document looked like. Indeed, they had not even seen their own mothers’ *Gayma*. At this point a slightly more outspoken friend, whom I shall call Jamilla, revealed that she had seen a copy of someone else’s *Gayma*. She explained that about a year ago, she was in her local internet cafe sorting through a stack of papers. She was, she explained, trying to find a report she had printed just five minutes earlier. Yet in the process of so doing, she encountered a copy of someone’s *Gayma*. These comments had captured most of the group’s attention and so within seconds of this revelation, another friend of mine asked who the *Gayma* belonged to. Jamilla stated that she did not know but had surmised that they were probably still in the cafe and so had quickly picked up her report, paid the cashier and left. Another friend quizzed Jamilla about its contents. Jamilla remarked that she was somewhat surprised by the extent of detail of this document; that this person’s *Gayma* included seemingly insignificant items such as teaspoons and plastic Tupperware. At this point a man from the group tutted loudly. He claimed that, whilst it was a woman’s right to draft a *Gayma*, including things like Tupperware was ‘uncouth’ (waḥīf). People who wrote the *Gayma* in this way were not trying to protect a female relative’s possessions but were instead seeking to insult the groom. Others within the group, uttered their agreement. These kinds of judgement mean that the person writing the *Gayma* must exercise considerable care to ensure that the choices they make about whether an item should or should not be recorded in the *Gayma* do not alienate or offend a bride’s prospective affines. ² These kinds of consideration contribute to the complex and sensitive nature of this task.

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²Such decisions are, of course, made in consultation with other members of the family.
The person writing the *Gayma* must also consider how best to describe a given object. Indeed Amr stated that one of the main reasons why his uncle was considered such an ‘expert’ at writing the *Gayma* was that he was particularly adept at describing objects in a detailed yet concise fashion; that his uncle’s written descriptions of objects were ‘like photographs’. The importance of such description was highlighted in a conversation with a single, female informant, Souad. Souad stated that whilst she personally disagreed with the principle of writing a *Gayma*, she believed that those who choose to write a *Gayma* should at least ensure that it is written well. She then began to speak about a female cousin who had married and moved to Saudi Arabia. This cousin’s parents had spent a great deal of money in preparing their daughter’s trousseau, and in furnishing her living room, and had recorded all of these items in the *Gayma*. Yet upon her return to Egypt, her husband had divorced her. He subsequently refused to return her property. Eventually, this cousin went with her father to speak to the local *ma’dhūn* (registrar). This registrar summoned her husband to bring all items listed in the *Gayma* to his office. Yet when Souad’s cousin came to collect these goods, she found that her husband had in fact substituted her washing machine and other key possessions for items that matched the description written in the *Gayma* but did not belong to her and were of inferior quality to her original possessions. Her family protested but the *ma’dhūn* (registrar) was unsympathetic. He stated that they had no evidence that these goods were not hers, and so there was nothing he could do. Various members of Souad’s family tried to pressure her cousin’s husband to return this cousin’s rightful possessions but she eventually had to admit defeat. Ultimately, poor description had undermined the legal efficacy of the *Gayma* and therefore compromised its protective value.

In a fascinating analysis of auditing process, Michael Power argues auditing serves to create a very specific from of accountability founded upon incomplete information and ‘shallow rituals of verification’ (Power 1997a: 123). Along with many others, Power suggests that the auditing process can have unintended consequences (Tsoukas 1997; Power 1997a, 1997b; Strathern 2000,2006; Shore & Wright 1999). It can erode relationships of trust and can give rise to the creation of ‘games of ‘creative compliance’” (Power 1997b:8). Whilst there is of course a great deal of difference between audit and the writing of a *Gayma*, many of the ideas advanced by
Power, and indeed other authors focusing on the topic of audit, resonate with my observation of the use of the *Gayma* in Egyptian marriage. Indeed, both the writing of a *Gayma* and the practice of audit are based upon a desire for verification. Whilst audit may be construed as a system of measures designed to allow for some form of regular verification of past conduct, the *Gayma* may be regarded as a legal instrument which offers a means through which a bride’s property rights can be officially verified in the event of future dispute. In the course of speaking about the *Gayma* my informants suggested that trust weakens the desire for verification, a point that has also been made in Marilyn Strathern’s (2000, 2006) and Michael Power’s (1997a, 1997b) work on audit. My informants argued that prospective affines who sought to draft a *Gayma* lacked faith in the longevity of a proposed marriage and, worse still, lacked faith in the character of the groom. Such affines, it was argued, felt the need to safeguard against the misappropriation of the bride’s property. For this reason, they suggested, the decision to write a *Gayma* was an insult against the groom. Such opponents of the *Gayma* may therefore be seen to vividly illustrate many theorists suggestion that the desire for verification is not without cost.

It should also be noted that in some instances the production of a *Gayma* is also without any great benefit. Indeed, whilst the *Gayma* can play a pivotal role in bringing a husband to account for safeguarding his wife’s property, the process of producing such accountability is by no means foolproof. In fact Souad’s account of her cousin’s dealings with the *Gayma* appears to suggest that the *Gayma*’s ability to deliver such accountability is vulnerable to ‘games of creative compliance’ (Power 1997b: 8). The existence of such ‘games’ serves to undermine the protective value of this key document.

The protective potential of the *Gayma* may also be compromised by its loss or destruction. For this reason, much care is taken to store this document in a secure fashion. Quite tellingly, it is customary in Egypt for a bride to keep the *Gayma* in a
safe place in the home of a member of her natal family (El Kholy 2002). Its loss, after all, would reduce her access to legal recourse.

**Unregistered Marriage**

In 1931, Article 99 of the ‘Egyptian Code of Organisation and Procedure for Shari’a Courts’ was amended so that ‘‘no disputed claim of marriage or acknowledgement thereof shall be heard in respect of events subsequent to 1st April 1931, unless established by an official certificate’’ (Translated and cited in Anderson 1951b: 113; my emphasis added). In other words, procedural reform instituted in 1931 meant the courts would no longer preside over conjugal disputes between members of an unregistered marriage in which one party denied that a marital union was ever contracted. The courts did however make an exception when asked to preside over paternity disputes between parties of unregistered unions. According to official records the quoted amendment was, at least in part, an attempt to deal with the legal complications created by a plaintiff who falsely claims marriage or by a defendant who disingenuously denies that a marriage has in fact taken place (Anderson 1951b), yet it should be noted that eight years prior to this procedural amendment, ma’dhūnīn (registrars) had been expressly forbidden from registering the marriage of female citizens under the age of 16 and male citizens under 18. In this way procedural reforms introduced in 1931 were seen to deter against the marriage of minors; the code restricted access to legal recourse in the event of dispute, without specifically outlawing this practice. These reforms took place at a time when marriage of minors was a source of acute interest and considerable controversy. Whilst early 20th century debate on this topic did make reference to the welfare of the parties (especially female) involved (Baron 1993; Kholloussy 2005; Kholloussy 2010), a number of commentators’ perceptions of this institution were framed by the belief that ‘‘a strong nation can only be built from a large, well-raised, educated offspring and such offspring can only be formed by mature mothers’’ (Quoted in Kholoussy 2005: 231).

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3Messick (1993) similarly notes that in Yemen, it was common for a wife to store her documents at the home of her father.
In this sense, a concern with minor marriage was, at least for some, also a concern with Egypt’s continued state of incomplete independence. By focusing their energies upon introducing procedural reform that would discourage, as opposed to outlaw, marriage of minors, the legislators had, it seemed, found a way of partially reconciling growing public concern about ‘the dangers of early marriage’ (Kholoussy 2010: 56; Kholoussy 2005; Baron 1993) and the belief that this was somehow blocking Egypt’s path to independence, with the fact that in many cases the marriage of post-pubescent boys under the age of 18 and post-pubescent girls under the age of 16 was seen as religiously permissible.

Yet, the introduction of the reforms described above also meant that persons who registered their marriage had greater access to legal recourse and state protection than those who failed to do so. A distinction between the state’s approach to registered and unregistered marriage is still apparent today and provokes considerable concern about the vulnerability of the wives who are party to such unions. In this section I describe Erfee (unregistered) marriage in greater depth and consider the relationship between transparency, legitimacy, regulation and protection. It is important to note that the registration of a union is not, strictly speaking, a pre-requisite for its religious legitimacy (see Hasso 2011).

Indeed, in a newspaper article published in December 2009, the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar is reported to have delivered a speech in which he spoke about a woman who had ‘consulted him for a fatwa’ (Adel 2009: 8). This woman was a widow and wished to remarry. However the registration of this marriage would result in loss of entitlement to her deceased husband’s pension. She therefore asked the sheikh if it would be permissible for her to marry without registration. I quote directly from the article:

‘I was at a loss” said Tantawi [i.e. the grand imam] “since all the conditions needed to make the marriage halal were covered, including acceptance on both sides, the dowry, witnesses and the necessary announcement, although the marriage itself was not legally registered.”

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4 Kholoussy (2005) mentions that this statement was made by the editors of Al Ahram, but does not specify their names.
Tantawi said that the marriage could not be forbidden as a result, “but my advice was, and still is, to avoid this type of marriage, if only to ensure that rights are protected in the future.”’ (Adel 2009: 8)

Sociologists, Mona Abaza (2001) and Frances Hasso (2011) also refer to the fact that some Egyptian widows strategically opt to leave their marriage unregistered in order to maintain their right to their former husband’s pension. For such women, the act of registering their marriage would, in Scott’s terms, make that marriage fully ‘legible’ (Scott 1998: 2) to the state and this can result in a loss of income. In this respect, the ‘illegibility’ of an unregistered union may in fact serve the interests of the wife. Yet it is important to emphasise that whilst Sheikh Al-Tantawi affirmed that in certain circumstances an unregistered marriage is religiously valid, he also suggested that registration has a bearing upon one’s ability to uphold one’s rights in the future. This is a point that, as we shall see, was reiterated by a number of my informants.

Towards the end of fieldwork, I had the opportunity to interview a lawyer who worked for the Egyptian Centre for Women’s Rights (ECWR). I knew this organisation had done some work on erfee marriage and so I decided to ask him about his experiences with dealing with this kind of case. This lawyer was not willing to describe any specific cases but revealed that in some instances underage women enter into customary marriages with the agreement that the marriage will be formalised as soon as the woman turns 18. Yet, in some cases the couple experiences problems and the wife is divorced before the marriage is actually formalised. In such cases, the court may intervene to make a husband fulfil his paternal duties but it will not act to protect the conjugal rights of the former wife. So, the institution of erfee marriage allows families to circumvent the state’s procedural restrictions upon marriage involving minors. Yet in the process of doing so, they place the wife within such non-normative unions in a particularly vulnerable position.

When I declared my interest in marriage in Egypt, some people would either playfully joke or express a serious concern about erfee marriage. On such occasions,

\[5\text{In 2008, the age at which a marriage can be legally registered was adjusted to 18 for both males and females. The } ma’\text{dhūn faces punishment if he registers the marriage of persons under this age.}\]
I would almost always comment that whilst I had read about this phenomenon in the newspaper, I did not really understand what *erfee* marriage was. In such cases, people would generally provide a rather stereotypical depiction of this institution. They would explain marriage is where two students or young people fall in love but either financial barriers or fear of parental disapproval prevents them from pursuing matrimony in an open and conventional fashion (see Abaza 2001; Zubaida 2003; Hasso 2011). And so, the couple decides to privately exchange vows and draw up a contract in the presence of two witnesses. A few people specified that these witnesses tended to be close friends of the groom. This is in contrast with normative arrangements in which one witness tends to be selected from the family of the bride and another from the family of the groom. In such relationships, the groom will furthermore frequently provide a token mahr.

Some people I spoke with believed that couples initiate this kind of union with the hope that they will eventually find themselves in a position to formalise and publicise their relationship. Others were more cynical. All stated that this kind of relationship places a woman’s rights in jeopardy. If anything went wrong, the groom could simply destroy the contract and, with the co-operation of the two witnesses, deny the existence of the union. In such cases, both the community and the state will struggle to make a man accountable for his relational responsibilities.

It must be noted that this sort of arrangement is a very particular kind of unregistered matrimony that is occasionally labelled *gawaaz as-siree* or secret marriage, the religious validity of which, is at best, ambiguous. The central problem is that it is unclear whether this kind of arrangement sufficiently satisfies the Sunni condition of announcement (*al-ismāḥ*). In more conventional unions, announcement is often achieved through music, ullulation, the wearing of rings, co-residence and the word of mouth of invited guests. Secret marriages are considerably more discreet. Indeed, the final wedding celebration is often dubbed *laylat az-zifaaf* or night of the wedding band. A couple of my informants argued that satisfaction of the principle of *al-ismāḥ* was dependent upon the number of people who knew about a union. Others believed it was dependent upon who knew about a union. A male acquaintance stated that if a hundred people knew about a marriage, yet a couple’s immediate family did not
know of the union then the condition of *al-ishhār* was unfulfilled and the relationship was not religiously valid. One registrar I interviewed stated that, in his view, in a city as large as Cairo registration was a pre-requisite for the achievement of *al-ishhār*. Ultimately, the religious validity of secret marriage is not clear-cut and, as will be illustrated later in this section, this has significant consequences.

However, the depiction above is not the only kind of secret marriage. Secret marriage can also spring from a desire to conceal a second marriage. In the previous chapter, I mentioned an interview with a divorcée. I described how Dina’s anxiety about the prospect of becoming an unwitting party to a polygamous union had prompted her to stipulate within her contract that her husband must inform her if he marries another woman. In the course of this interview Dina spoke about the events which led up to the dissolution of her marriage. She described how, five years into her marriage, she was growing increasingly frustrated with the politics in her office and so she decided to resign from her job. She had been head-hunted on numerous occasions and thus believed that finding a new position would be relatively easy. However, shortly after resigning, she realised she was pregnant. She felt duty-bound to disclose this fact to any prospective employers who, upon hearing this news, swiftly suggested that she contact them after she had given birth.

This period of unemployment placed substantial financial pressure upon Dina’s husband. Dina, meanwhile, was growing increasingly upset and frustrated at home. Around this time, she began to notice her husband was becoming increasingly cool and distant. She also became aware that he was flirting with a female colleague and suspected he was probably confiding in her as well. Specifically, she was concerned that her husband was telling this female colleague about their marital difficulties. However, Dina was even more worried by her husband’s seeming lack of interest in their unborn child. She explained that when she was pregnant with their first child, her husband had been incredibly attentive and had accompanied her to all of their doctor’s appointments. However, this time Dina’s husband failed to attend any of the ultrasound check-ups. Whilst I would suggest that this could be symptomatic of the financial pressure he was under and the fact that this was his second child, Dina
clearly believed this failure to attend these appointments was symptomatic of the declining state of their relationship.

Yet about a month before the actual birth, Dina’s husband’s attitude began to change and he seemed to return to his normal self. Soon enough, Dina began a new job. Yet approximately eighteen months later, her husband’s behaviour changed once again and he became increasingly confrontational. She felt, she claimed, like she was living with a stranger. So, one day Dina was in the car preparing to visit her parents. Dina’s husband had decided not to join them. As she was getting ready to leave, Dina noticed that she had dropped her son’s shoe. Her husband offered to fetch it, but she decided to collect it herself as she wanted to pick up a scarf from the bedroom. When Dina reached the bedroom, she noticed her husband’s phone was unlocked. This did not happen often, and so, Dina began to read the messages. From these messages, she could quickly discern that her husband was in a relationship with another woman.

She called her own mother and her husband’s mother to discuss the situation. Dina’s father subsequently contacted her husband and demanded him to visit a ma’dhūn, and register a divorce. The divorce was registered within two days.

Shortly after discovering this infidelity, Dina asked her husband about the nature of his affair. She explained to me that she was secretly hoping that he had married this woman. At this point, I must have looked puzzled as she quickly explained that her former husband was still the father of their children and she did not like to think he was a sinner. In my view, this comment demonstrates the centrality of religion for understanding unregistered marriage in Egypt. Dina’s husband was not only accountable to the people immediately affected by his relational conduct, including his children; he was also accountable to God, and Islamic law prohibits sexual contact outside wedlock. As it happened, his relationship with this colleague was an onfession marriage and so Dina was satisfied that her husband had not committed a religiously prohibited act.

Yet before I move away from this account, I think it is important to emphasise that registered and unregistered marriage often produce different kinds of visibility. A law passed in 1985 meant that husbands wishing to marry a second wife were obliged to provide the registrar with their first wife’s name and address.
would then send a letter notifying the first wife of this marriage (Hasso 2011). Yet, as mentioned in Chapter Five, Dina was rather sceptical about the effectiveness of this mechanism and so had opted to include a clause within her contract which specified that her husband should inform her if he married again. Yet despite both state regulation and Dina’s best efforts, she found that she had been made an unwitting party to a polygamous marriage. The institution of *erfée* marriage plays a key role in making this kind of situation possible. However it is also rumoured that some husbands who have registered a second marriage intercept the *ma’dhūn*’s letter and thereby sabotage state efforts to make a husband’s second marriage visible to his first wife.

The fact that state regulations may compel citizens who wish to register their marriage into disclosing their relationship in particular ways has also been observed by Perveez Mody. Mody’s account of love marriage in India, mentions that persons wishing to solemnise a marriage under the Special Marriage Act 1954 are required to provide court officials with thirty days’ notice. These officials subsequently send the couple’s application for marriage to their home address and post their details on the court notice board. This process increases the possibility that the couple’s natal kin will come to learn of the couple’s desire to elope before the couple is able to conclude their marriage in court. And such knowledge can hinder the couple’s attempts to register their relationship. However, some couples find ways of intercepting the delivery of their application and of defacing the court’s notice-board so that the details of their proposed union are no longer visible (Mody 2008). Whilst in many ways the registration of a second marriage in Egypt and the registration of a love marriage in India are quite different, in both these contexts we encounter state-sponsored bureaucratic processes, which are directed towards creating certain forms of intra-familial disclosure that can limit the production of these particular kinds of relationship.

Yet in the course of conversation with a mature, upper class, divorcée I began to realise that the desire to restrict knowledge of a man’s second marriage did not always stem from a concern with how such knowledge would affect that man’s first wife. I first met Aisha whilst attending a coffee morning at a local women’s group,
and over time we became quite well acquainted. Her father had studied engineering in London and she was always keen to share what he had told her about the city. She was furthermore always eager to share titbits of advice which helped with both my project and with my assimilation to everyday life in Cairo. I knew she had been married when she was young and had been divorced for quite some time.

About three months after our first introduction, Aisha mentioned her ex-husband, and I observed that she had never really discussed her own beliefs about, and experience of, marriage. Aisha said there was much to discuss and so we arranged to meet two days later. So, we met for coffee and Aisha described the process of getting married to, and divorced, from her first husband. She also spoke about the difficulties her daughter faced in finding a suitable match.

Aisha had married in 1967 and divorced in 1972. So, after a while I asked Aisha if she had ever considered remarriage. I was not prepared for the response she gave. At first Aisha began to speak, at what seemed like a tangent, about the beauty and flexibility of Islam. She stated that, contrary to Western opinion, Islam granted women great choice and freedom. She declared that if a married man in the West wanted a relationship with another woman he would be compelled to divorce. Yet within Islam there is a phenomenon called, here she stopped grasping for an English translation, and then surrendered to say ‘gawaaz al-erfee’. Aisha then stated that one could marry in private without registration and that such an arrangement would satisfy all of the Shariah conditions for a union. This institution, Aisha argued, was particularly useful when a husband had grown bored with his wife but she was hesitant to divorce. This, Aisha claimed, was especially true if a wife’s hesitancy to divorce is the product of a desire to maintain the image of a ‘perfect family’ in order to preserve a child’s marriage prospects. In such a case, a wife might allow her husband to undertake an erfee marriage with the provision that he keeps this relationship discreet. In these circumstances, Aisha claimed, the man can have a relationship with another woman without committing adultery, the wife preserves her

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6 English was our chosen medium of communication as her competency in English far outstripped my competency in Arabic.
marriage and reputation, and any children’s marriage prospects are unaffected. In this way, she argued, Islam delivered a solution to a complex human problem.

I am still trying to process all that Aisha said, and continue to be puzzled by the extent of her candour. Yet, at this point, I think it is worth highlighting two key issues. First, the status of polygamy in Islam, and the importance of ensuring that all acts of sexual intimacy take place within wedlock, plays a fundamental role in shaping the way that many Muslims, including Aisha, view particular forms of relational conduct. And so, a married man who enters into a sexual relationship with a woman whom he has also married is simply engaging in a polygamous relationship. Yet a married man who enters into a sexual relationship with a woman whom he has not also married is seen to have indulged in \textit{az-zina}\footnote{az-zina is a particularly loaded term and refers to sexual contact out with the bounds of marriage.} and to have committed a grave sin. Hence, in accordance with Jack Goody (1969), anthropologists studying marriage should be aware of the possibility for cross-cultural variation in definitions of sexual transgression. Secondly, I wish to highlight that Aisha’s comment that a husband’s conduct can affect a family’s image and can therefore damage the eligibility of one’s offspring highlights once again both the profound importance and the relational nature of reputation in Egypt.

Aisha’s portrayal of \textit{erfee} marriage neglects the fact that this practice can place women who enter into this kind of union in an extremely vulnerable position. Such vulnerability is, at least in part, a product of the distinction between the ways the Egyptian state approaches registered and unregistered marriage. In recent work on statecraft, James Scott argues that ‘paper records are the operative facts in a court of law, in an administrative dossier, and before most functionaries. In this sense there are virtually no other facts for the state than those contained in documents standardized for that purpose’ (Scott 1998: 83). This, of course, is of profound relevance to Egyptian women who enter into an unregistered union only to find that their husband fails both to fulfil his financial obligations and to admit to the state that they are currently or were in fact previously married. Indeed, such women find that they do not possess the ‘paper records’ (i.e. an official marriage certificate) that will allow them to establish ‘the operative facts’ in a court of law. They thus find that
their capacity to ensure that their husband meets his financial obligations is compromised. Such obligations may include the provision of maintenance during marriage and the provision of the *muta‘axxar* upon a divorce initiated by the husband. However, it should be noted that such wives may also appeal to friends and family to mediate and intervene in situations in which a husband is not fulfilling his marital obligations. This kind of extra-judicial pressure can play an important role in the protection of a woman’s rights. However, access to such intervention may be limited by the secrecy of a marriage.

Whilst official marriage certificates might be considered the ‘operative facts’ in ‘a court of law’, when an unregistered wife wishes to compel her husband to fulfil his financial obligations to her as a wife, they are not the only ‘operative facts’ in cases of paternity dispute. In Egypt, considerable emphasis is placed upon ensuring that legislation pertaining to personal status is consistent with Islamic law (Mahmood 2012). In a fascinating analysis of paternity disputes in Islamic courts, Ron Shaham considers what counts as evidence of paternity in Egyptian courts. He notes that Islamic legal definitions of paternity are distinct from biogenetic definitions of paternity. Indeed within Islamic legal thought, paternity is generally seen as the product of reproduction within an Islamically licit union and so a child born out of wedlock is ‘classically denied paternal relations in Sunni thought’ (Clarke 2008: 163; see also Clarke 2009; Shaham 2010) and is thus considered to be without a legal father. Shaham observes that the Egyptian judiciary has hitherto privileged Islamic definitions of paternity over biogenetic ones, and that this has two key consequences. First, proof of biological paternity is not seen as sufficient for the establishment of legal paternity. And second, it means that paternity disputes tend to centre around establishing whether the child in question is the product of a religiously valid marriage, albeit registered or unregistered.

Whilst Egyptian courts would not grant legal paternity to children whose biological parents openly confess that that child was conceived outside of wedlock, it is perfectly possible for children spawned from public but unregistered marriages to acquire legal recognition of their paternity. Yet what of children resulting from secret, unregistered unions? Whilst many of my informants would tell me that the
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igious legitimacy of secret marriage (*gawaaz as-siree*) is somewhat ambiguous, Shaham notes that the Egyptian courts tend to adopt a rather liberal interpretation and ‘lenient’ (Shaham 155: 2010) definition of what constitutes a religiously valid marriage. Hence children of secret, unregistered marriages may theoretically acquire legal recognition of their paternity. Yet wives of secret, unregistered relationships often struggle to prove that their child was conceived within the bounds of marriage. Any wife who enters into a marriage runs the risk that their marriage contract will be lost or destroyed and that both their appointed witnesses will lie in the event of dispute. Yet, the risk of such an occurrence is somewhat greater within unregistered marriages for two key reasons. First, whereas couples wishing to contract a registered marriage will frequently ask one relative from the family of the groom and another relative from the family of the bride to act as formal witnesses, it is customary for couples entering into secret unregistered unions to ask only friends of the groom to act as formal witnesses. If a husband in such a marriage wishes to evade paternal responsibilities, such friends might be persuaded to lie. Second, couples who enter into unregistered unions tend to draft just one or two copies of their marriage contract. In cases in which one contract is made, it is kept in the custody of the groom. In cases in which two contracts are made, one is kept in the custody of the groom and another is kept in the custody of the bride. Yet, the much reported plight of Egyptian designer, Hind al Hinnawy illustrates that wives of unregistered unions can be tricked into returning their contract to their unregistered husband and thus find themselves dispossessed of this important piece of evidence in the event of dispute (see Hasso 2011). ⁸ In contrast, couples who enter into registered unions find that officials make additional copies of their contract to be stored in the registrar’s office and in the civil registry. These additional copies make it rather difficult for a husband to dispossess a wife in a registered marriage of access to a copy of that marriage’s contract.

A wife who enters into a secret, unregistered marriage may find herself unable to establish the existence of a marriage by either calling upon the formal witnesses of

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⁸ Hind al Hinnawy sparked considerable debate when she publicly declared that she had been party to an unregistered union and sought state recognition of her daughter’s paternity. For further information on this case, see Hasso 2011 and Shaham 2010.
that marriage or by proffering a written contract. However Shaham (2010) observes that such a wife may still be able to ask other individuals who, for whatever reason, were aware of the existence of a marriage to testify in court and may thereby acquire legal recognition of both the existence of a marriage and the paternity of the offspring resulting from that marriage. The importance of acquiring such recognition is not to be underestimated. Indeed disputes over a child’s legal paternity can obstruct a child’s ability to become a legally registered citizen and can therefore adversely affect that child’s ability to access public services such as schools and hospitals. Such disputes also mean that the unregistered wife is vulnerable to accusations of az-zina, a grave religious offence.

**Conclusion**

Whilst much recent work on transparency and accountability has focused on issues such as governmental benchmarking and financial regulation (Tsoukas 1997; Strathern 2000, 2006; Power 1997a), Marilyn Strathern (1999) points to the potential for exploring the themes of transparency and accountability within the context of kinship. Drawing inspiration from Strathern, this chapter has considered the relationship between transparency and accountability within the context of Cairene Muslim marriage. It is important to note that both the celebration of yoom at-tangeed (the day of upholstery) and the practice of writing a Gayma (list) tend to be initiated by the family of the bride as opposed to that of the groom and both these practices seem to place particular emphasis upon making a husband accountable for protecting his wife’s property rights. In a similar vein, discussions about unregistered marriage tend to emphasise the vulnerability of the women who enter into this kind of union (see also Hasso 2011). Hence in the context of these three key practices, we see that the desire for increased transparency is at least partially gendered.

A number of analysts focusing upon audit have paid particular attention to the relationship between trust and the desire for increased transparency and accountability. They have argued that ‘trust releases us from the need for checking’ (Power 1997a: 1). Strathern (2000, 2006) along with Shore and Wright (1999) has
been highly critical of the increasing prevalence of audit within higher education suggesting that ‘checking only becomes necessary in situations of mistrust’ (Strathern 2000: 1), and that the kind of checking that audit entails may inadvertently corrode the sense of trust, loyalty and solidarity that is so vital to the effective functioning of any institution. This is an argument that strongly resonates with the way that many Egyptians speak about the Gayma. Yet I think the fact that work on audit and transparency has been so heavily concentrated upon large-scale institutions, has led to a neglect of the relationship between trust and vulnerability, a consideration that I think is vital for understanding the desire for increased transparency and accountability. Active attempts to ensure that a prospective groom can be made accountable for his future actions, is often seen as indicative of a lack of trust. Yet the act of foregoing measures designed to increase a bride’s ability to make a groom accountable for acting against her interests is far from desirable. Indeed ‘trusting’ in this manner is a risky process and can produce considerable vulnerability.

Recent work on audit has paid particular attention to the elusive nature of absolute transparency. Such work has been highly adept at drawing attention to the fact that auditing efforts to create transparency might shed light on some phenomena only to cast darkness upon other phenomena. Whilst I am not concerned with audit per se, I am concerned with the issue of transparency and I would contend that a more complete understanding of the partial nature of transparency requires the analyst to ask who is kept in the light and who remains in the dark. It is important to note that, in some cases, certain kinds of visibility are tied to others. For example, in Egypt a man who wishes to register his second marriage, and thereby makes that marriage visible to the state will, in principle, be compelled to make that marriage visible to his first wife. One might also note the existence of a relationship between visibility to specific entities and access to particular kinds of regulation and protection. Indeed a woman who registers her marriage and thereby makes it visible to the state is able to appeal to the courts for legal intervention when her husband fails to meet his financial obligations. This is in marked contrast to the kind of state protection offered to women who enter into unregistered unions. One might finally suggest that the fact that concerns with transparency, accountability, regulation and trust are such
prominent features of the cultivation of marriage in Egypt illustrates once again the vulnerability of those entering into conjugal relationships and the anxiety which surrounds this process.
**Conclusion**

This thesis is framed by the belief that investigating the processes through which kinship is produced, in concrete and specific as opposed to abstract and general terms, allows us to understand kinship in new ways and sheds light upon aspects of its constitution that might otherwise have remained obscured. My subscription to this belief is, at least in part, a consequence of reading *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. In this most seminal of texts, Bourdieu argued that attempts to determine the principles which govern spouse selection and alliance formation from the collection and analysis of genealogical data alone were likely to mislead. Indeed, he argued that anthropologists who adopt such an approach ‘forget all that is implied in extracting from the product the principles of its production’ (Bourdieu 1977: 36) and hence often overestimate the impact of rules upon social life and frequently fail to recognise when a relationship has been retrospectively recategorised to fit with official norms. He therefore urged future anthropologists to adopt a more diachronic approach to the study of kinship and to consider the kinds of social and material interests that the production, maintenance, or destruction of a given relationship might fulfil. Such an approach, he suggested would allow us to redress the ‘naive legalism’ that pervaded so much of what might now be labelled as ‘old kinship studies’.

In a similar vein, Bourdieu alerts us to the potential for discrepancy between a given people’s official discourse on kinship, which he notes ‘informants are inclined to present ... as long as they see themselves as spokesmen mandated to present the group’s official account of itself’ (Bourdieu 1977: 37) and kinship as lived reality. This insight has been thoroughly assimilated by the reconstituted field of ‘new kinship studies’ (see for example Carsten 2000a; Stafford 2000) and most certainly shaped the way I conducted fieldwork. Indeed it convinced me of the importance of ensuring that my study of the genesis of marriage in Egypt incorporated an enquiry into the concrete and specific experiences of those involved and this, I would suggest, meant that I was alerted to the fact that the marriage-making process does not always proceed in a straightforward and orderly fashion. Indeed this is a process that often entails disruptions, blockages and in the event of the breakdown of an
engagement, rupture. Such realities, I would argue, are frequently eclipsed when marriage comes to be represented like this:

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I have sought to open up some of the complex histories that lie behind these schematic representations. Yet I have also referred to proposals refused, and relationships that never quite reached the point of marriage. Such experiences rarely feature in official records of relatedness but nonetheless constituted an important component of my informants’ relational histories and serve to highlight some of the difficulties associated with the cultivation of Muslim marriage in Cairo.

I would suggest that the fact that I had opted to explore individual experiences of the marriage-making process also meant that I was in a position to appreciate and examine its emotional content, an aspect of relatedness which Janet Carsten (2000a) contends more formalist approaches to the study of kinship tend to neglect. In this thesis, I have sought to apprehend the acute sense of anxiety and uncertainty which surrounds the making of Islamic marriage in Cairo and to examine the myriad ways in which Cairene Muslims deal with these uncomfortable emotions. In so doing, I have argued that the anxiety and uncertainty which surrounds the marriage-making process in Cairo cannot be entirely separated from the kinds of uncertainty which pervade broader public life.\(^1\)

Just over a month after I left fieldwork, Egypt’s political situation changed quite dramatically. On the 17\(^{th}\) December 2010, a Tunisian fruit and vegetable seller by the name of Mohammed Bouazizi ‘set fire to himself’ in anger over a local policeman’s decision to confiscate his produce.\(^2\) This sparked considerable protest across the country against corruption, unemployment and declining standards of living. Eventually on the 15\(^{th}\) January 2011, the Tunisian president, Zine Al-Abidine Ben Ali, was compelled to flee the country amidst escalating protest (Chrisafis & Black

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1 This is made particularly evident in my discussion of the impact that the provision of a ‘suitable’ home has upon relational trajectories in Cairo.
On the 17th January 2011, an Egyptian man set fire to himself in front of the Egyptian parliament ‘in an apparent attempt to highlight poor living standards’ (Jones 2011). And on 25th January 2011, crowds of protestors flooded into Tahrir Square and expressed their grievances against Mubarak’s regime and about the state of the country. Eighteen days later, Mubarak resigned and handed power to the military (McGreal and Schenker 2011). Since then elections were held and Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood became president (Hussein & Borger 2012). Yet civil unrest continues, and the economic and political future of the country seems uncertain. In this thesis, I have described how phenomena such as inflation, housing policy and legislative reform come to shape the experience of becoming married in Cairo. I have, in short, demonstrated that marriage is not produced in a socio-economic vacuum and this leads me to suggest that Egypt’s changing political landscape may have an impact upon the anxieties, uncertainties and concrete activities of those planning and preparing for marriage.

Arjun Appadurai (2013: 285) has called for a broadening and deepening of the anthropological study of ‘the many ways in which humanity has encountered, managed and anticipated the future as a cultural horizon’. This thesis sheds light upon the manner in which aspiring affines in Cairo confront, comprehend and seek to forecast and secure their own or their loved one’s conjugal futures. For many Cairene Muslims, the long term viability and auspiciousness of a particular union cannot be taken for granted. Instead, many find themselves engaging in a series of strategies to forecast their future with a given set of affines and to mitigate some of the financial, reputational and personal risks associated with an inauspicious match.

While it might be argued that ‘the future is by definition’ (Arendt 1958: 237) uncertain, I have suggested that awareness of and concern about this fact can vary considerably according to context. This is a point that has been made somewhat more obliquely in Anthony Giddens’ discussion of ‘fateful moments’ (1991:112). Giddens describes fateful moments as situations in which ‘individuals are called on to take decisions that are particularly consequential for their ambitions, or more generally for their future lives’ (1991: 112) and moves on to state that such situations are often treated with particular trepidation. This, he asserts, is not so much due to an
assessment of the probability that ‘things will go awry’ but is instead due to a concern with the ‘scale of the consequential penalties for getting things wrong’ and the sense that any decision taken carries an ‘irreversible quality’ (Giddens 1991: 114).

There is, of course, a great deal of overlap here between Giddens’ description of ‘fateful moments’ and my informants’ accounts of becoming married in Cairo. Indeed many decisions made within this domain are believed to be of particular consequence to those most intimately involved. While various strategies including the writing of a Gayma are deployed to mitigate some of the risks associated with an inauspicious match, the ‘scale of the consequential penalties’ (Giddens 1991: 114) of a failure to forge a viable, durable and satisfying match is the cause of some alarm. This is linked to a broader recognition that many actions and decisions within this domain possess an ‘irreversible quality’ (Giddens 1991: 114). Such a recognition manifests itself in a variety of forms but is particularly apparent in discussions about the impact that a terminated engagement can have upon societal assessments of a woman’s eligibility. Yet to return to the broader picture, it can most certainly be argued that many in the process of becoming married in Cairo inhabit what Giddens would describe as ‘fateful moments’.

Interestingly, Giddens (1991: 113) himself claims that ‘fateful moments include the decision to get married, the wedding ceremony itself- and, later, perhaps the decision to separate and the actual parting’. This is most certainly the case for the aspiring, former and current fiancés and fiancées described in this thesis, yet the extent to which this might be the case in other cultural settings is worthy of future investigation. Indeed, one might reasonably question whether the decision to get married constitutes a fateful moment for the Vezo of Madagascar who, according to Rita Astuti, find that customary marriage is ‘easy to contract and easy to dissolve’ and state that one marries ‘“just for pleasure”..., like “going for a stroll”’ (Astuti 1995: 67). This is something that Astuti attributes to the low level of material investment required for performing a wedding and establishing a conjugal alliance. Yet, in my view, a more detailed account of Vezo attitudes towards intimacy and
definitions of sexual propriety might shed further light on the apparent ease with which the Vezo approach the decision to get married.

If we look more closely at Giddens’ suggestion that the decision to get married constitutes a fateful moment, we might also find that, that which makes this decision fateful varies from culture to culture. However Giddens’ work, along with that of Hannah Arendt, can be applauded for drawing attention to the ambiguous nature of human agency. This is an issue that has been explored in the course of this thesis and most certainly contributes to our understanding of the anxiety and uncertainty which so often surrounds the making of marriages in Cairo. While Giddens’ pays particular attention to agents’ concern about the ‘scale of the consequential penalties’ (1991: 114) of an unwise action or decision, Arendt draws our attention to the unpredictability of the outcome of our actions and, along with Giddens, highlights the irreversibility of our deeds. In so doing, these theorists shed light upon experience of agency and the burdensome nature of action.

It is important to note however that we are not completely powerless in the face of this burden. Indeed Arendt claims ‘the possible redemption from the predicament of irreversibility’ (Arendt 1958: 237) lies in the capacity to forgive and that ‘the remedy for unpredictability ... is contained in the faculty to make and keep promises’ (Arendt 1958: 217). Whilst this thesis does not really deal with the issue of forgiveness, it does deal with Arendt’s work on promises. Indeed in Chapter Five I outlined and critiqued Arendt’s rather idealistic portrayal of the power of promises in social life.

At this stage, I would add that I also take issue with Arendt’s claim that ‘the faculty to make and keep promises’ constitutes ‘the remedy for unpredictability’ (Arendt 1958: 217 my emphasis added). Indeed, in the process of undertaking fieldwork I found that there were many other potential ‘remedies’ for unpredictability. In this thesis, I have sought to describe these potential remedies and to delineate if and how they serve to, at least, partially alleviate some of the anxiety and uncertainty spawned by the unpredictability of the long-term consequences of a given choice in conjugal partner. Such remedies include the gathering of information about one’s prospective affines through third party sources and divination through the performance of ṣalāt al-ʿistikhāra. Such remedies also include efforts to attenuate the perceived
indeterminacy of life after marriage by ensuring that objects such as the marital abode are acquired in advance. And further include efforts to create zones of security, to insulate oneself or indeed one’s loved one from some of the ‘consequential penalties’ (Giddens 1991: 114) commonly associated with inauspicious matches including material hardship and the potential for misappropriation of one’s property. In this sense one might argue the provision of a shabka, the registration of the mutaxxar and the drafting of a Gayma (list) may be viewed as ‘remedies’ for the unpredictability of the long term consequences of a given choice in marriage partner.

Yet, however much such ‘remedies’ might alleviate some of the anxieties associated with the unpredictability of the long term consequence of a given alliance, very few of my informants believed that they could ever be entirely certain of the auspiciousness of a given match. Those embarking upon marriage therefore grapple with the possibility that they might one day become the victim of the decisions they have made.
When transliterating from Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), I have deployed the system set out in the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*. When transcribing from Egyptian Colloquial Arabic (ECA), I have adopted the system outlined in *The Dictionary of Egyptian Arabic* by el-Said Badawi and Martin Hinds (1986).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>al-‘aānīs</td>
<td>MSA</td>
<td>A term used to refer to an unmarried woman.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>al-‘aānīsa</td>
<td>MSA</td>
<td>A term used to refer to an unmarried woman.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ʿaayza atagawaz</td>
<td>ECA</td>
<td>I (f. sgl.) want to marry. This is also the title of a bestselling novel by Ghada Abd El Aal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>al-ʻānīsa al-bint al-rashīda</td>
<td>MSA</td>
<td>The virgin, adult.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ayat</td>
<td>MSA</td>
<td>Verses within the quran.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>aʿyd al-aʿdhai</td>
<td>MSA</td>
<td>Festival of the sacrifice. During this festival, animals, most typically sheep, are slaughtered in commemoration of Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son under God’s command.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>azmat al-gawaaz</td>
<td>ECA</td>
<td>The crisis of marriage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>baǧfeef</td>
<td>ECA</td>
<td>Monetary tip.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bayn naaрайn</td>
<td>ECA</td>
<td>Between two fires. One is caught between two dangerous/undesirable situations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bayt al-aʿāiʿla (sgl)</td>
<td>MSA</td>
<td>The term bayt al-aʿāiʿla can be translated as house of the extended family and within Cairo is generally used to describe a block of flats inhabited by many units of a husband’s broader kin. Each unit, that is a married couple and unmarried children, inhabit a separate flat which generally contains its own cooking and dining facilities, although members of each separate flat may choose to eat together with varying degrees of frequency.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bayt al-aʿāiʿla (pl)</td>
<td>MSA</td>
<td>The term bayt al-aʿāiʿla can be translated as house of the extended family and within Cairo is generally used to describe a block of flats inhabited by many units of a husband’s broader kin. Each unit, that is a married couple and unmarried children, inhabit a separate flat which generally contains its own cooking and dining facilities, although members of each separate flat may choose to eat together with varying degrees of frequency.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ฎmān</td>
<td>MSA</td>
<td>Security.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ad-dibla</td>
<td>MSA</td>
<td>This is a plain band. It is worn on the right hand during engagement and transferred to the left hand either at the point of consummating the marriage or at the point of cutting the wedding cake. It can play a role in both commemorating a relationship and in communicating a person’s relational status.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(layla) ad-duξla</td>
<td>ECA</td>
<td>The night of consummation - this refers to an event in which the union between two families is celebrated. A couple is expected to consummate their union and begin cohabiting after this celebration. This celebration is also labelled (layla) az-zīfaaf.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>al-faṭḥa</td>
<td>MSA</td>
<td><em>al-faṭḥa</em> is the opening chapter Šūra of the quran.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gawaaz al-erfee</td>
<td>ECA</td>
<td>This is often translated as customary or unregistered marriage. Quite often people use the term gawaaz al-erfee to refer to secret marriages which are also unregistered.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gawaaz al-ḥubb</td>
<td>ECA</td>
<td>This might be translated as love marriage. See chapter one for a detailed description of the way in which this term is utilised by</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arabic Term</td>
<td>Language</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
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<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gawaaz aṣ-ṣaloon</td>
<td>ECA</td>
<td>Cairene Muslims. This is commonly translated as arranged marriage but in more literal terms can be translated as marriage of the living room. See chapter one for a detailed description of the way in which this term is utilised by Cairene Muslims.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gawaaz as-siree</td>
<td>MSA</td>
<td>Secret marriage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ghazāla al-aʿṭal</td>
<td>MSA</td>
<td>This refers to a washing machine with a smaller than average drum. This kind of washing machine tends to be used for the laundering of children’s clothes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gihaaz al-ɛaruusa</td>
<td>ECA</td>
<td>The bridal trousseau.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ḥarām</td>
<td>MSA</td>
<td>Forbidden</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ijāb wa qabūl</td>
<td>MSA</td>
<td>This literally translates as offer and acceptance and within the context of this thesis refers to a speech act performed by the groom and the bride’s guardian during the contract-writing ceremony.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ikhtilāṭ</td>
<td>MSA</td>
<td>This is the verbal noun of the infinitive ‘to mix’. Within the context of this thesis it refers to gender-mixing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>al-infitāḥi</td>
<td>MSA</td>
<td>This is often translated as ‘open-door policy’ and refers to a process of economic liberalisation first initiated by Sadat in 1974.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>al-ishhār</td>
<td>MSA</td>
<td>Broadcast or announcement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'iṣma</td>
<td>ECA</td>
<td>This refers to a practice in which a prospective husband grants his prospective wife the right to divorce of her own accord.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ithbāt</td>
<td>MSA</td>
<td>Proof.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>katb al-kitāb</td>
<td>MSA</td>
<td>The writing of the contract. This refers to a religious celebration/ceremony in which the contract of marriage is written.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>khaaḍba</td>
<td>ECA</td>
<td>Matchmaker.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>khul’</td>
<td>MSA</td>
<td>This refers to a specific kind of divorce. It refers to female-initiated, unilateral, no-fault divorce.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>maaiḍat ar-raḥmaan</td>
<td>ECA</td>
<td>Tables of Mercy. These tables are established during the month of Ramadan and provide free food for travellers and poor people wishing to break the fast.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>maʿdhūn (in)</td>
<td>MSA</td>
<td>The maʿdhūn is a state functionary whose duties include the registration of marriage and divorce.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>al-mahr</td>
<td>MSA</td>
<td>This is a form of bridewealth payment. In Cairo, this consists of a sum of money which passes from the groom (and/or indeed his family), ideally, to the bride alone. al-mahr can be subdivided into al-muGaddam and al-muṭaxxar.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>maktab al-maʿdhūn</td>
<td>MSA</td>
<td>The office of a state functionary known as al-maʿdhūn whose duties include the registration of marriage and divorce.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>al-muṭaxxar</td>
<td>ECA</td>
<td>al-muṭaxxar constitutes a part of the mahr. In Cairo, the term al-muṭaxxar is used to refer to a sum of money which flows from the family of the groom, ideally, to the bride alone after marriage. It can theoretically be given at any point after the legal union of a couple but in Cairo is generally seen to be given following widowhood or divorce.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>muḥāfiẓ</td>
<td>MSA</td>
<td>Conservative.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>al-muGaddam</td>
<td>ECA</td>
<td>al-muGaddam constitutes a part of the mahr. In Cairo, the term al-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Term</td>
<td>Language</td>
<td>Definition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td>------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>muGaddam</td>
<td>MSA</td>
<td>is used to refer to a sum of money which passes from the family of the groom ideally to the bride alone either prior to or at the point of marriage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mushykat al-a’zhar</td>
<td>MSA</td>
<td>is a key centre for religious learning within the Arab world but it is also a popular and prestigious venue for the performance of kath al kitaab.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>muthaqqaq</td>
<td>MSA</td>
<td>Cultured or educated.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>naadee</td>
<td>ECA</td>
<td>This tends to be translated as club. Private members clubs are a popular institution in Cairo and can be found in affluent and in poorer neighbourhoods and are occasionally linked to particular professions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nuṣf ad-dyn</td>
<td>MSA</td>
<td>Half of the religion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>al-Gayma</td>
<td>ECA</td>
<td>This literally translates as the list but within the context of marriage it refers to a document in which the family of the bride and that of the groom determine how property will be divided upon divorce.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>raka’a</td>
<td>MSA</td>
<td>Ritual cycle.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ṣaḥḥ (aṣḥaab)</td>
<td>ECA</td>
<td>Friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ṣalāt al-fajr</td>
<td>MSA</td>
<td>The prayer at sunrise.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ṣalāt al-istikhāra</td>
<td>MSA</td>
<td>This refers to a specific form of Islamic prayer in which “guidance is sought when one is unable to decide between two permissible alternatives” (Mittermaier 2011:96). It can be performed for any kind of decision but is frequently associated with marriage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sha’bī</td>
<td>MSA</td>
<td>This adjective is derived from the noun ash-sha’b which means the people and depending on context it can mean working class, popular or uncouth.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ash-shabka</td>
<td>MSA</td>
<td>Marital jewellery.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ḥabka iṣ-ṣyn</td>
<td>ECA</td>
<td>In literal terms, ‘ḥabka iṣ-ṣyn’ translates as marital jewellery of China. Yet my informants utilized this term to refer to any kind of jewellery made from fake gold or other fake minerals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sharaf</td>
<td>MSA</td>
<td>Honour.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shilla</td>
<td>MSA</td>
<td>Circle of friends.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ṣūra</td>
<td>MSA</td>
<td>Chapter within the quran.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>at-tafriq</td>
<td>MSA</td>
<td>A kind of female-initiated divorce that will only be granted by the courts on very particular grounds such as abandonment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>takāfu’</td>
<td>MSA</td>
<td>Equivalence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ṭalaq</td>
<td>MSA</td>
<td>Male-initiated divorce.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>thawāb</td>
<td>MSA</td>
<td>Divine blessings rewarded in the afterlife.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>u’ṣra</td>
<td>MSA</td>
<td>Nuclear family.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>waḥiḥ</td>
<td>ECA</td>
<td>According to context, this can mean ugly or uncouth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yūm uṣ-ṣubāḥiyya</td>
<td>MSA</td>
<td>This refers to the day directly after the celebration of laylat az-zifaaf (see below). On this day the bride and groom will customarily receive a visit from their respective parents.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yoom at-tangeed</td>
<td>ECA</td>
<td>This literally translates as ‘the day of upholstery’ and refers to a celebration in which the bridal trousseau is displayed and in which various items of furniture for the couple’s conjugal residence are upholstered.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>zaghrada</td>
<td>MSA</td>
<td>Ululation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>zameel</td>
<td>ECA</td>
<td>Colleague (s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(zamaaГl)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>---</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zawāj</td>
<td>MSA</td>
<td>Marriage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(layla) <em>az-zifaaf</em></td>
<td>ECA</td>
<td>The night of the wedding band – this refers to an event in which the union between two families is celebrated. A couple is expected to consummate their union and begin cohabiting after this celebration. This celebration is also labelled <em>laylat ad-duxla</em>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>az-zina</em></td>
<td>MSA</td>
<td>This is a particularly loaded term and refers to sexual contact outside the bounds of marriage.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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